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YET TROUBLE CAME

David Cornwell / CRNDAV004

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2011

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ABSTRACT

These nine stories – which, together, form the collection *Yet Trouble Came* – were written between May 2009 and July 2011. Although there are no apparent structural links between the stories (such as common characters or events), they were definitely conceived of as all belonging to a particular mood – or even, perhaps, as all being variations of a particular theme.

This theme, I suppose, is South African Disappointment. I do not have the time or scope in this abstract to fully explain what I mean by this term – but Stephen Watson's immortal essay *A Version of Melancholy* expresses it beautifully; as does some of (the supervisor of this manuscript) Damon Galgut's writing, Don MacLennan's poetry, Johannes Kerkorrel's music, and David Goldblatt's photography. For now, a serviceable definition might be that feeling of anxious exhaustion one feels, when dealing with a world that refuses to live up to one's best expectations of it. My aim with this collection – the contribution to South African writing that I wish to make – is to give this feeling its first sustained fictional rendition, and to show how ordinary people may endure it with their dignity still in tact.

I do not want to say any more about the stories in this abstract. As Don MacLennan once said, “If I could tell you what my poems were about, I'd have no need to write them” – and I trust in this idea; that if the stories are worth anything at all, they will speak for themselves. Rest assured, however, that they have been carefully and lovingly crafted – and that they appear here as complete as I am capable of making them.

YET TROUBLE CAME

STORIES BY

DAVID CORNWELL

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A SMALL MAN CAN BE JUST AS
EXHAUSTED AS A GREAT MAN

— ARTHUR MILLER, *Death Of a Salesman*

HONEY TRUCK

Dalen took them slowly along the Grahamstown road, the headlights off and his foot barely touching the accelerator, in third the whole way, doing twenty-five at the most. Frank had the passenger door open and his head hanging outside the cab, watching the shoulder through squinted eyes, looking out for pot holes, and telling Dalen how to steer. The moon was big, and it lit up a sky full of clouds.

Frank tried to smoke, but it just blew right up into his eyes. He handed the cigarette over to Dalen, and said "Here." Otherwise, they were quiet.

They'd been going like that for twenty minutes, when Frank said "*Jussus*, Dalen. Who's here to see us anyway?"

"There's people living along this road, even if *you* can't see them, Frankie."

Frank said, "Well, what if there's a kudu?"

"Then I gun it. You got to hit them. You fucked if they hit you."

"And me here, with my head hanging out?"

"There's no kudu, oraait? Just relax, Frankie."

"It's freezing here in the wind, man."

"Just relax," Dalen said. "We almost there."

Frank lifted his head and spat, then decided to leave it alone. This was Dalen's thing. His idea, his boss's bakkie.

While he watched the shoulder, and felt the wind get so cold, it was like it was *under* his skin, Frank started to sober up. The way he knew it, was this feeling — this creeping, desperate feeling, that'd moved into his gut like a boarder a few months back and just wouldn't get out, every morning there it was, the same — right then Frank felt it again, just starting to kick.

He'd met Dalen in the cheap bar on the edge of the township, where you were allowed to drink quarts and give the bottles back when you were finished for deposit money. He'd been looking for work that day — had driven all the way to PE for an interview, got there too early, got himself too nervous to do it without a drink, and then been shy and embarrassed when they asked him questions, convinced they knew he was already on his way. He'd planned to just drink in the cheap place by himself, until he was sure his wife'd be asleep when he got home — but when Dalen'd sat down next

to him, also with his back to the tv everybody else was watching, Frank'd found himself wanting the company.

They bought a pack of cigarettes to share, and they got drunk together for hours — talking nicely, and taking turns buying rounds, till they both ran out of money.

That's what started Frank on the whole long thing about his problems — he remembered, that's how it all started — with him not being able to get another round, and getting sad about it, and then like a tap opened up, just going on to Dalen about the factory closing, and the baby, and the hospital bills, and the way the Medical Aid's been fucking him and how mean his wife's been to him, lately. And with Dalen just looking at him, listening the whole time, then saying "I know where we can get some money, Frankie" — the first thing he said when Frank was finished — and from there, how it'd all just unspooled, how he'd left his car keys behind the bar so they could take a six-pack out on credit, and how he'd found himself in the bakkie, then heading *out* of town, then with the lights off and a whole big stealth mission going on —

And he sat up and said, "Listen, Dalen — I'll be honest, I'm losing my gees here. If we're going to keep driving like this, I need to drink more."

Dalen said, "Okay Frankie, I promise, from here, it's one more hill, then we turn off."

Frank watched the shoulder as they climbed the hill. He felt Dalen brake against the back of the slope, then heard him say "Okay, pull your head in now, Frankie." Frank sat back in his seat and closed the door, and they went off the road, onto a wide dirt shoulder. Some stuff that was in the back of the bakkie started clanging.

Dalen went a little further — onto a thin dirt road, with a fence running along Frank's side of the bakkie, and long grass growing on the verge, sometimes slapping on the headlights and the bonnet. Dalen stopped the bakkie and opened his door, got the six-pack from under the seat, and got out. Frank followed him out his side.

They got the tailgate on the bakkie down, and they sat there, looking out at a dark view of the road. A tiny bit of fog was in the air. Dalen gave Frank a can from the six-pack, and Frank opened it and drank nearly half in a sip. Right away, he felt some tightness go out of his stomach.

"Shit, that's better," he said.

They stayed quiet for a bit, just sipping their beers, before Frank said "So who's this guy who owes you cash, Dalen? And why all this, with the lights off? I mean, I don't mind — there's no fucking way I'm going home before three, anyway, at *least*."

"Ag, I'll tell you now-now," Dalen said. "It's a bit of a long story. You want 'n haelgeweer?"

"What?"

"With the beer. You know it?"

Frank said he didn't. Dalen got two more cans out of the six-pack, and gave one to Frank. Then he stood up and got a bunch of keys out his pocket, and laid the can flat across his palm. He took the key for the ignition, and stuck it in the side of the can. Beer sprayed all over his jacket.

"Poes," he said, then threw the keys to Frank. "You don't know this?"

Frank shook his head.

“Stick a hole there. Maar soos *gentle*, nie soos ek nie. And make sure the, that thing you pull at the top — make sure that’s pointing down, straight down. And make sure the can is properly flat.”

Frank stood up, then worked the key into the can. There was a loud hiss, but nothing spilled out.

“Kwaai,” Dalen said. “Now cut a hole.”

Frank gouged a hole, and then spent a little time trying to flatten the ragged bits on the edges.

Dalen said, “Okay. Now you put your mouth there, and then lift it up and pull the thing at the top.”

“What happens?”

“It goes down, quickly. Like ’n haelgeweer.”

“Alright. Cheers,” Frank said — before he put his lips around the hole he’d made, and made the can stand straight up while he popped the tab, and the beer flew down his throat. He felt it in his head right away — and it felt like he’d thrown a bucket of water on the fire in his stomach. He looked up again at the sky, and the moon was out — and it just happened, he howled at it.

He looked over at Dalen, and saw that Dalen’d struggled with his — his clothes were wet, and he was fussing with his lip like he’d cut it on the tin. “Hey, shut up” Dalen said. “Are you mad?”

“Sorry, man. That just felt *good*,” Frank said. “Come, tell me about this guy now.”

“Ag, his name’s Derek. Dingy white ou, with a farm here,” Dalen said, and pointed up the road.

“Why does he owe you money?”

“Dingy Derek? Fucking owes everybody something.”

“It’s not Derek *Viljoen*, hey?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he tall?”

“Ja. Poes tall.”

“Black hair?”

“Ja,” Dalen said — and Frank could see something happening to him, almost like he was coming alive, properly, for the first time — “*Ken jy hom, Frankie?*”

Frank said, “I went to boarding school with him, in PE. His dad gave me a lift home two or three times, for holidays.”

Dalen just put his hands in front of his face — then laughed like a banshee, and said “Dis vokken *kwaai!* God loves us, Frankie. Dis *perfek!*”

“Why? What’s the story here, Dalen?”

“Hey, have another beer, Frankie. I’ll tell you in the car, I promise. Just now.”

“No fuck that, Dalen,” Frank said. “I’m *going* to have another beer — but before it’s finished, and I mean before we get back in the bakkie, you’re going to tell me. Okay?”

“Ja, okay. Sure. Just give us a second, quickly,” Dalen said — then put his beer on the tailgate, and went and climbed back into the bakkie. Frank turned his head and watched him. The door was left open, and in the dome light, Frank could see him move over into the passenger seat — then lean forward and get busy with something, Frank couldn’t see what.

Frank sipped his beer, and stared out through the fog at some dead trees in a field on the other side of the road. The trees were clean and white, like bone, and they were jagged all over — and in the moonlight, and with the fog, it was easy to imagine like they were burning down. Or just melting even, right into the air. Looking at them got Frank feeling lonely. He went to see what Dalen was doing.

The first thing, before his eyes adjusted, Frank heard a sound — like a dull scrape, coming from inside the cab. He saw Dalen cutting something on the dashboard. He had a pocket knife, and he was sawing at something pinned under his fingers. Even though it was dark, Frank could see he was doing it badly — putting cuts in the plastic.

“Hey careful, man. What’re you doing? You’ll mess it up like that,” Frank said.

Dalen didn’t even look up.

Frank got into the driver’s seat, and he saw a hard thing, like a crystal, pinned under Dalen’s finger, and little bits of powder around it. He saw that Dalen’d cut himself — and that there was a trail of blood that went from his finger, down his palm and his whole wrist onto the dashboard, and drops of it on his jeans.

“Shit, what’s that?” Frank said.

“You’ll see now-now, Frankie,” Dalen said, and Frank watched him put the crystal in a ragged plastic bag, and screw the bag up into a ball. Then Dalen put the ball in the little pocket in his jeans, and from the pocket underneath it, he pulled out a dirty handkerchief. He unrolled the handkerchief, and inside it was a glass pipe, in two pieces. The whole small piece, and about half of the long piece was pitch-black. Dalen screwed the pipe together, then sucked his finger and wiped it with the handkerchief — and then he quickly pinched up all powder on the dashboard, and put it in the top of the pipe. “Chips there, Frankie,” he said — and they both got out the driver’s side of the bakkie.

Frank said, “Is it drugs, hey Dalen?”

Dalen didn’t say anything. He got a box of matches out his jeans, then sucked at his finger again. He took two matches at the same time, and popped them, and got a big flame going — and as soon as the flame went near the pipe, it started smoking. Thick, white smoke, with a smell that got Frank in his lungs — he felt like he was smelling it down in there. Through the smoke, he could see the end of the pipe, glowing like a cigarette.

“Jussus Dalen, that stuff’s like poison,” Frank said — and as the smoke cleared, he looked at Dalen’s face. Dalen had his lower jaw juttied out, and was letting little cords of smoke flow up from his bottom lip, and he had his nostrils flared out like he was trying to suck the smoke back through his nose again. His eyes were bright, and slitted. He tried to say “Hier’s sy,” but coughed — and just held the pipe out to Frank.

“No I’m fine, thanks,” Frank said.

“Come on, Frankie. Trust me. This thing with Derek, it’s complicated. We need to be brave.”

The ember in the pipe was still glowing, and it smouldered still, and stank.

"No, what the fuck? I can't, Dalen," Frank said. "I have to go home to my wife just now" — and it was the first time he'd thought about that for a while, *pictured* it — and a big, burning wave went through his stomach, and made him have to lean a bit, with his hands on his thighs.

"You okay, Frankie?" Dalen said.

"Ja, just my stomach."

"Come, this is like medicine. And just relax about your wife, bra — I've got work at nine o'clock. In *this* fucking bakkie."

"What does it do? Is it like zol?"

"Uh-uh. Zol makes you tired, this makes you strong," Dalen said — and smoked the pipe again, just a little suck, and more smoke came out. Then he put his hand in front of his face, and made that screaming laugh again, and said "Glad nie, Frankie! You must, you must."

Frank said, "Shit Dalen. All I wanted to do was go get some money with you, so we could keep drinking at the shebeen, and I didn't have to go home and have a fight. Then, fuck, we're driving fifteen kays out of town, with the lights off like we're smugglers — and now you're trying to *make* me smoke some stuff that smells like fucking drain cleaner? This is fucked, man. Let's just go home, I'll drive."

"No man, relax," Dalen said. "We're here now, we're going to do this. And I *tell* you Frankie, this will help. I'll drive, man, don't worry, just smoke."

"Bullshit you'll drive," Frank said.

"I will, bra," Dalen said. "You think *I* can't drive gerook? Trust me, I do this. All the time, easy easy."

Frank said, "Dalen, please. I don't want to. I'm getting scared and I want you to drop it, please. And I want that last beer in the pack, too."

"*Scared?* Because why?"

"I don't do stuff like this, okay?"

"Poes. You drink, mos. I can see that."

"Hey, fuck you — my stomach fucking *hurts* until I drink, Dalen, I told you that."

Dalen said "No, you're right Frankie, I'm sorry. It's not the same. Think about Popeye. This is like spinach for Popeye."

"But why must *I*? This is all *your* shit, Dalen — I'm just here with you."

"Look, you'll see now-now, okay? It's complicated, with Derek. But he owes me *lots*, Frankie. And I'll give you some, I promise."

Frank couldn't help himself. He said, "How much?"

"If he's got all my money, I'll give you a thousand, if you help me. No, okay — if he's got *all* of it, two thousand, Frankie, I promise," Dalen said. And then he smiled, a thin, wide smile, and he said "But you *have* to smoke first, that's the deal."

It's been a feature of Frank's life the last few months, ever since they moved to Bedford, into the small, cheap house he bought with his severance, ever since he's had to pay for stuff like nappies and

formula, and he's had to borrow money from cash shops to do it — at night, when he's home, and sober, and he can't sleep — to lie awake with his debts on his mind, and to pray for moments like this, money coming to him, from nowhere. "Two thousand?" he said. "What do I have to do?"

"You'll see. Nothing hard, nothing funny."

"And that stuff," Frank said, pointing at the pipe, "How's it feel?"

"Like your blood's not blood anymore, it's petrol."

"Okay," Frank said. "Pass here."

Frank held the pipe, while Dalen got his matches out his pocket. There was a terrible, beating, flapping feeling in Frank's stomach, like a giant moth'd got in there — and his blood already felt hotter than it should've been. Dalen said, "Ek wag, Frankie" — and made a gesture like Frank should put the pipe in his mouth.

"I don't know actually, hey Dalen," Frank said.

"I *do* know, Frankie. Kom nou. Five, four, three —"

"Wait," Frank said. "Do you promise I'll get some money out of this?"

Dalen said, "If I do, you do" — and Frank put the pipe in his mouth, and Dalen struck two matches.

Frank leaned toward the flame, and sucked, just a little. Smoke poured into his mouth. He coughed, and the beer in his stomach rushed up. He stumbled forward and vomited. His ears were ringing and his hands shook, and his eyes watered like they were trying to put a fire out but outside the pain — beyond it, like something coming into view — Frank sensed the world again, the cold night on the sweat on his face, and he felt right then that everything was as beautiful and painful as being born and more than anything, Frank wanted to talk, but for ages, all he could do was moan and retch, and spit, buckets of spit. The first thing he said, as soon as he could, was "Shit, do you also feel like these moonbeams are making you *hot*? Fuck, it's like silver *sun*."

Dalen laughed, then said "I'm sorry you kitched, hey Frankie. Always happens, first time. Myself, it was three or four times."

Frank smiled at Dalen, and put his hand on his head, and just let it rest there for a while.

Dalen took the pipe back, sucked it a little more, got some more smoke — then tapped the end out on the side of the bakkie, and put the handkerchief over his palm and unscrewed the pipe, then folded the pipe back into the handkerchief, and put it all away in his jacket. "So, back in the bakkie, hey Frankie?" he said, as soon as he was done.

"Ja, probably be fun," Frank said — and went and climbed across into the passenger seat.

He heard Dalen put up the tailgate, then Dalen got in the bakkie and fired the ignition. He spent a while trying to get it in gear. Finally, it made a horrible, grating sound, and went in.

"Your boss's clutch is fucked, hey Dalen," Frank said.

"Ag, he won't be my boss forever," Dalen said — and just then, that was one of the strangest, most beautiful things Frank'd ever heard someone say, it almost felt like it was going to make him cry. They moved off down the road again, and even though the stuff in the back of the bakkie was banging, and

Frank thought he could hear a loose bearing rattling somewhere underneath — the way he sat brought a really sweet pressure into his groin, and it was wonderful in the cab with the headlights off, just going by the moonlight — and he felt better, happier in his body, than he could remember feeling maybe since forever, and he just said “Hey, thanks so much Dalen, shit.”

“For what now, Frankie?”

“Just all this, man,” Frank said. And then he remembered what was even better. “And the cash, obviously — I mean later, if there’s any.”

“Frankie,” Dalen said. “You know, people like us, we have to make plans. Ek’s reg, né? Otherwise, all the shit just climbs on top of you, and if you’re not careful, if you don’t make a plan —”

“You *collapse*,” Frank said.

“Presies, ja. And you stay down.”

“That’s it, Dalen,” Frank said. “*That’s* it. I can’t tell you. You know just now, when I said that thing about the cash? You know what I thought of, the first thing? There’s a fucking shoebox at my place, I hide it from my wife — just in that one, there’s slips from these cash shops, and a letter or two, probably about eight grand’s worth — just in the secret box.”

And as he said it — just like the way without you even doing anything, dreams can slip into nightmares sometimes — things started turning for Frank. He kept speaking, but now he felt wire in his blood, and a hot, acid kind of sweat come out in the skin around his throat. “You know, Dalen,” he said. “I think *I’m* collapsing — honest. I swear, sometimes, it’s when I shave, and I’m looking in the mirror, fucking eight in the morning, I see it sometimes — I look, I mean to *myself*, I look like a guy who if I saw him in the street, I’d probably think he needed some fucking change off me.”

Dalen braked, hard — you could hear stones kicking up, and there was a big cloud of dust around the bakkie when they stopped. He turned the engine off, and as soon as it went quiet, Frank heard dogs barking.

“Fuck, Frankie, kom nou,” Dalen said. “Vasbyt — we have to be brave now, we almost there.”

He felt stung, but Frank said “Sorry, man. I’m just saying, you know, thanks for helping me. I need it.” Then he said “Hey, are those really dogs?”

“Ja, Derek’s dogs.”

“Jeez, what’s the story? Does he have a kennel?” Frank said.

All Dalen said was “Chips there, Frankie” — and then he leaned slowly across, keeping his eyes locked on Frank’s, and Frank couldn’t look away. Dalen opened the cubby hole and quickly stuck his hand inside it, then took his hand back to his side of the cab.

When Frank saw the gun, all he said was “*No*, fuck no. No Dalen, please.”

“Now listen, Frankie.”

“What the *hell*, man?” Frank said. “No, Dalen. *No*.”

Frank opened his door, right into the fence — and Dalen grabbed his jacket and pulled him down into his seat.

“Come, just listen now, Frankie. You think this thing is for you? There’s no bullets, even. Look.”

He pulled the trigger a few times, and nothing happened. He said, “Dis net vir *effek*, jy weet?”

“Okay, well why Derek then?”

“No he’s a poes, Frankie. Don’t pretend he’s nice,” Dalen said. “He’s ’n vokken freaky, tall, dingy poes.”

“How do you even know him?” Frank said — and then he said, “Oh *fuck*, he sells drugs, doesn’t he?”

“Jy’s slim, Frankie.”

“Can’t you just take me home first? I swear, I won’t say anything. You can keep the money, whatever.”

“No, that won’t work, Frankie,” Dalen said.

“Why? I don’t even live all the way back in town, I promise. It’s close to here, my place.”

“It’s not that, man,” Dalen said. “It’s complicated.”

“What do you mean?”

“Derek knows me.”

“So what?”

“We need to get *in*, Frankie. You’ll see now-now.”

“Is it because of the dogs?”

Dalen smiled, then said “Jy’s *regtig* slim, Frankie.”

Frank said, “Dalen. Please, listen to me. I don’t want to do this, okay? Just *listen* to me, hey Dalen — I *don’t want* to do this. I *can’t*.”

“Okay, I’ll give you *half* the money we take here, Frankie. On my mother’s life, I will. And if it’s just rock, I sell it, and I still give you half. Could be twenty, thirty grand, if we lucky.”

“But it’s not just the money though, Dalen. I’ve got a daughter, and she’s small and sick — and I *can’t do this*, okay? *Look* at me. There’s no ways it’s okay that I do this.”

“Kak it’s not about the money, Frankie.”

“No really, please — I just want to go home.”

“Met jou vokken leë hande? *Kak* you do.”

“Well, what do I have to do? I’m not touching the gun, Dalen, I swear to God I’m not. I don’t care even if it’s plastic, I’m not.”

Dalen said, “Just ring the bell on the gate there, and when he answers, say hello and tell him to come open up. That’s all. You can come back to the bakkie after that.”

“Who must I say I am?” Frank said.

Dalen laughed. Then he said, “Jy weet nie?”

“I haven’t seen the guy in about fifteen years, Dalen.”

“Maar dis wat ek het gesê, Frankie — dis *perfek*! If you haven’t seen him, he hasn’t seen you. He doesn’t know you don’t dwelm. Just say you heard he was selling.”

“What else?”

“Just say you itching. Say you need him, whatever. Just make sure you tell him to come open up.”

“Dalen, listen — I know there aren’t any bullets in the gun. You can’t make me do this.”

“Bra, we will do this. It will *work*. This ou thinks he’s clever, but he’s never been tested, Frankie. That’s us, now, tonight. Then tomorrow, think, if you get your shit sorted out, you take that shoebox you were talking about — and you make a braai and you can burn it, Frankie, gone.”

“What if I still say no?”

“You won’t, because we not going to fight,” Dalen said. “You and me, we a team.”

Frank was quiet for a while.

“What’s the thing with the dogs?” he said.

“You’ll see now-now.”

“Are you going to hurt him?”

“Nothing serious, I promise.”

“What if he calls the police about us?”

“Frankie, he’ll *never* call the kêrels. They get to his place, they lock *him* up first. Just go ring the bell there, bra. Check, his lights are on still. He never sleeps.”

Dalen got out the bakkie, and held the door open for Frank — but Frank just sat there.

Dalen put his head back inside the cab, and said “Kom nou, Frankie. Uit die bakkie. We not going to fight.”

Frank climbed out. They walked a bit further up the road, until Frank could see a big gate coming up on the left. Dalen said, “Ek bly hier, Frankie” — and he went and stood behind a hedge that grew next to one of the gate posts.

As Frank went to the gate, he was sure the dogs got louder. Through the thin fog, he saw the house in the middle distance — the outline of it in the moonlight, and one red curtain that glowed in a room somewhere. The dogs were in front of the house. In the moonlight, the lawn was light, nearly silver, and the dogs were all dark — except for one near the front, it was thin and pure white, like a ghost dog.

Frank counted ten of them. Big ones — rottweilers, mastiffs, police dogs — each chained to a tall piece of metal planted in the ground. Ten metal stakes. Five on the righthand side, five on the left, with a muddy strip on the lawn that went right through the middle. All the dogs were running against their chains, and they were barking and snapping — mostly just at the air, but also sometimes one of them would turn around, and go for the one behind it.

Frank’s hands were shaking — and he could feel it, his nerve was gone. He heard Dalen say “Come, ring it, man” from behind the hedge — but it still took a while, before he pushed the button. It squawked and then rang twice, two flat rings.

“Ja, who’s there?”

Frank said, “Ja, hi. Is this Derek?”

“Ja. Who’s this?”

"Hey man, it's Frank. Frank Rose. From school."

"Frank *Rose*? From *school*?" Derek said — in a shaky, lonely kind of voice.

Frank said nothing for a while. He heard Derek say "Hello? Are you still there?" — and then he looked around, and saw that Dalen had come out from behind the bush, and was making faces at him like he had to go on.

Frank said, "I wanted to know maybe if I could get some stuff from you. I need it. If that's okay?"

"Are you the police?"

Frank could barely hear him because of the dogs. "No man, I'm Frank," he said. "I promise, you know me" — and when he *heard* those words, Frank's whole face started burning, and it felt like it was going to be hard for him to speak, from then on.

Derek said "Frank, you could still be the police."

"I'm not, man. I promise I'm not," Frank said — and then the intercom squawked again, and a light on the verandah went on. Right away, the dogs got softer. Frank heard a door scrape open, and then he heard whistling — just three notes at a time, over and over again, in the same way.

The dogs started to whine and to sit down at the end of their chains, and Frank saw Derek coming across the lawn, still whistling. He was wearing a long coat that hung loose all around him — and he was ridiculously tall. He looked far more like a scarecrow than a person, and the dogs made horrible noises when he walked past them — desperate, pathetic noises — and they all had their heads leaned forward, and some of them were giving him their paws but he came right through the middle, without stopping.

Frank tried to run.

As soon as he turned, he bumped into Dalen. Dalen caught him with one arm, then hit him — just once, but sharp, right under his ribcage. Frank went to his knees and couldn't stand up for a little while, but Dalen pulled him up by his jacket, and put a hundred rand note in his hand and hugged him, and rubbed his back a few times then said "Do it, Frankie" — and pushed him back toward the gate.

Frank's eyes were watering, and it hurt him to breathe, but he stayed on his feet. Derek came up to the gate. Frank looked all the way up into his face — and even in the moonlight, he could tell Dalen was right, it looked like Derek hadn't slept in years.

"Do you have money?" Derek said. "Where's your car?"

Frank was struggling to make words — but finally, he held out the note and said, "Is it a hundred?"

"It's as much as you want," Derek said.

"I want a hundred."

"Ja, fine. Do you want to come in? We can smoke, if you want."

Frank didn't answer. He just shook his head — and he heard himself make a whimpering sound, that felt like it'd come from his chest.

“Hey, fuck, what’s wrong?” Derek said. He stepped back from his side of the gate. “What’s up, man? What’s wrong?” he said —

And right then, it was like a bomb went off in Frank’s stomach. It burned so sore he had to bend over — but even like that, he saw Dalen go past him to the gate, with the gun out, pointing it up at Derek’s head.

“Open up,” Dalen said.

Derek turned, and started to run, and Frank heard the dogs howl, and then Dalen fired a shot into the air — a real shot, loud as fucking anything. Frank could smell the gun powder, and then it was like he was tasting it — and he just heaved like he was going to throw up, three times, but nothing came out.

When his head stopped spinning, Frank forced himself to stand up. He could hear the chains creaking even above the howling, and the dogs were breathing so hard, he could see, there was a whiter bit of mist, just around them. Derek was walking backwards toward the gate, with his arms out at his sides, and his hands all limp.

“Open it,” Dalen said. Then he reloaded the gun.

Frank could see that Derek was shaking. He turned around, and when he lifted the keys to the lock, he dropped them. “Please,” he said — to Frank. “Do it. I can’t.”

Frank looked at Dalen, but he was just aiming the gun. “Dalen,” Frank said. “What the hell’s going on, man? You said there were no bullets.”

“Nie nou nie, Frankie,” Dalen said — still staring up through the sight at Derek’s head. “Just grab the keys, and open up.”

Frank wondered how Dalen sounded so calm still. It scared him — scarier than if he’d screamed. Frank got on his knees, and started feeling around with his hands under the bars of the gate. He felt like he barely had the sense of his fingers, and after a little while, he said “I can’t find them, Dalen, I’m sorry.”

“Se *gat*, Frankie. I can see from *here*, man. By his shoe.”

Frank saw the keys, and picked them up.

There was a moment then, where Frank knew, somewhere deep down, that he had to throw them away — he *felt* the moment, and he felt his will come short, and he felt the moment passing — and then he heard Dalen say, “I shoot *him* first if you do that, Frankie.”

He looked around, and Dalen was still looking right over the gun — but he had a thin, cruel smile on his face, that just told Frank he knew he wouldn’t do it. Frank closed his eyes, and stood up. Then he unlocked the gate.

He heard Dalen say, “Mooi so, Frankie” — and then saw him go through the gate towards Derek. “Turn,” Dalen said. “Now take us. If they bite, I shoot all of them. *Then* I shoot you.”

They went a few steps, away from Frank. He heard Dalen say “Hurry up, Frankie, get behind here.”

Frank said, “No, I want to wait in the bakkie.”

“Uh-uh, no ways, Frankie,” Dalen said. “Come, get in close here.”

Frank caught up to Dalen, who walked right behind Derek, who’d started whistling again — the same three-note thing, except this time, it was ragged. Frank thought even a dog could tell it wasn’t the same — and he worried right then, he *saw* it all ending with Dalen emptying the gun. The dogs made noises in their throats, and some of them had curled their lips back, so you saw their wet teeth shining, and you could smell their breath in the steam pouring out their mouths — but somehow, Derek kept whistling — and they all sat down when he got close. And it was strange, but after they’d gone past the first few — who ended up just making sad, kind of embarrassed sounds, and lying down — Frank knew the rest of them were going to hold themselves back, as well. He let himself look up, and he saw the dark figures leading him toward the red curtain in the distance, and the moon like a giant piece of bone beyond that, and the dogs lying in the pale grass on either side of them, whimpering, with their heads down, like praying — and he felt party to something truly evil, and huge, bigger than normal life.

When they got into some of the light spilling from the verandah, Derek stopped whistling — then went and sat down on the front steps. Frank could hear him breathing, hard, like he’d just been running. Really looking at him then, Frank could tell it was the same person he remembered from school — but only just. At school, Derek’d been a swimmer. Now, he was so thin that it hunched him — even sitting down, he had a hump — and he had a gold tooth now that really didn’t suit him, and he’d always had deep set eyes, but they didn’t always just look like holes.

Dalen said “Kom nou” — and pointed at the house with the gun. “Inside.”

They went straight into a big room, lit by a floor lamp without a shade. There was an extension cord going from the lamp to the wall where the red curtain was. Frank saw it was actually just a red sheet Derek had tied up to the curtain rails. There were two low couches on that side of the room, next to the lamp — one of them with foam and a spring sticking out of it, the other one brand new, with the plastic still on. There were little groups of plates and polystyrene boxes and knives and forks all over the floor.

On the other side of the lamp, was a chair with a table in front of it. The chair had a blanket on it — like that’s where Derek’d been sitting. There was a big sheet of tinfoil on the table in front of the chair, and the tinfoil had powder on it.

“Sit,” Dalen said.

Frank went and sat next to Derek on the good couch.

“Nie *fy* nie, Frankie,” Dalen said.

“No, please Dalen,” Frank said. “I want to.”

“Fuck, oraait. Your wish. *You*,” Dalen said, pointing with the gun at Derek. “Just sit. Just wait. Is this stuff *reg*?” he said, nodding at the powder on the tinfoil.

“Ja, it’s nice. I was smoking when you came.”

Outside, the dogs were howling again, and Frank could hear the chains grating. He said, “Hey Derek, would it be okay if I fed your dogs or something? That noise is killing me.”

"Shut up, Frankie," Dalen said, and he went and sat on the chair in front of the table, and put the gun down — but so the barrel was still pointing more or less at Derek. Then he got the handkerchief with the pipe in it out his jacket, and screwed the pipe together, and put some powder in the top. He stood up to get his matches out his pocket, and then sat down and lit the pipe. Almost right away, he went behind a cloud of smoke. It hung there, it was heavy smoke — and then Dalen stood up and walked through it, with the pipe in one hand and the gun in the other.

He came forward and pressed the gun right into the middle of Derek's forehead, and then gave him the pipe. He said, "This — this means you give me what I ask."

Derek nodded, then sucked for a long time on the pipe. Frank put his sleeve up in front of his face so he wouldn't get any of the smoke. Derek gave the pipe to Frank when he was done, and Frank just sat with it. Everyone was quiet for a while. It was just the dogs barking, until Derek said "Just wait, one second, okay? Don't shoot me, please" — then went over to the sheet, and drew it back and opened a small window on the side, and shouted "Hey! Shut the fuck up!" at his dogs.

When he came back, he tried to sit down, but Dalen stood up and grabbed him. He held him quite rough, and he said "Okay — I want your money and your drugs. *Alles*. And your tv, what's the make?"

"I don't have a tv," Derek said.

"Okay fine, but the other stuff. Now. *Roer*," Dalen said — and bumped the gun against Derek's jaw.

"Ow, fuck man," Derek said, and rubbed his jaw. Then he started pacing around the room — scratching at himself like mad, and making strange sounds, almost like he was singing to himself. "No man, this is fucked. I'm going to call the cops," he said — and then he looked over and Dalen aimed the gun at his head again, and he just wrung his hands and moaned, "*Fuck*."

He pulled at his hair and beat his hands on his long head, and then he went over to the fireplace in the back corner of the room. He knelt down and stuck his arm up the chimney, and he brought down a plastic packet wrapped round and round with brown tape. He brought it back and threw it on the floor in front of Dalen.

"Okay, there," he said. "This is it. Just this and that on the foil there."

"Kak," Dalen said.

"No, really."

"*Kak*."

"Please, man. You've got to leave me some."

"Ja, maybe I will. But only if you bring it *all* here, *now*. That's your best chance."

Derek went out the room — and Frank saw a light go on, and then he heard a drawer open, and some pots and pans banging together. Derek came back into the room with another packet, also wrapped in tape.

"Daar's sy," Dalen said. "And the money?"

"Okay, no — I *really* don't have any. You can see, I just bought."

"No, but you have *some*."

"Fuck man, I have to eat. And my dogs."

"So eat your dogs," Dalen said.

For a while, Derek just stood there in front of the table and looked at the floor — breathing hard, shaking his head, and making fists, with his hands down by his sides.

"Hey," Dalen said. "*Hey*."

And Frank knew what was coming — he even blocked his ears — before he watched the bullet go into the wall over Derek's shoulder, right near where it met with the roof. Derek bent over and put his hands over his ears, and Frank could hear that he was screaming, and watching him — with his hands up like that on his ears, and his black eyes, and the way he was shouting things — was like watching a devil dying, it was too much, Frank had to close his eyes.

When Frank opened his eyes and took his hands off his ears, he heard the dogs again, and the chains — and then Derek saying, "*Fuck*, man. It's right next to you, okay? In the thing there on the table."

Dalen went over to the lamp, and brought back a metal thing that looked like a lunchbox. Dalen looked at it, then gave it to Derek. Derek got it open, then gave just the bottom half back to Dalen. Dalen looked inside it for a while. Then all he said, he didn't even look up — he just said, "Eight *hundred*?"

"I told you, man. I just bought. You *know* I just bought."

"Not enough," Dalen said — and he walked over to Derek, and put the gun up against his chin.

Derek dropped the other half of the tin and fell on his knees — and then all of a sudden, he had his arms around Dalen's legs, and his face was right on Dalen's shoes — and he was just saying over and over again, "But I *told* you, I *told* you, I *told* you I just bought." Frank watched him put his hands in his pockets, and pull out everything he had in there and try give it to Dalen — his lighter, a crinkled pack of cigarettes, his Zam-Buk, a few coins, a thing that was either a note or a slip — and just the way he did it, with his hands up and his head down, like it was even going to make a difference, stirred something inside Frank.

He looked around, and just on the other side of the couch, he saw a half-full quart resting on a polystyrene box. He reached out slowly for the bottle so he wouldn't creak the plastic on the couch — and he remembered how Dalen'd brought the gun down when he loaded it earlier, at the gate, how he'd brought it down and done it at his hip — and he thought about it, hard, and he was sure Dalen hadn't done that since he put the bullet in the wall. Frank hid the bottle behind his back, and got off the couch.

He did everything he could to sound like he wasn't scared — like actually, he was *enjoying* himself — and he said, "Dalen, this guy's a joke, man. He's useless. Just jack another round in the chamber there, and let's finish it." He walked right up close to Dalen while he said it. Dalen was staring straight down through the sight on the gun, even though he had the barrel on the crown of Derek's head.

Frank heard Dalen grinding his teeth, and breathing, way up in his chest. There was sweat on his forehead. "Hey, Dalen?" Frank said, and waited maybe five seconds.

Then he swung the bottle against the back of Dalen's head — it didn't break, but it made a bad sound — and Dalen went straight down, and beer flew everywhere, and a huge bump came up on the back of Dalen's head. The gun fell out his hand and landed next to a dirty plate. Frank dropped the bottle and picked up the gun, and ran straight to the door.

It was still dark when Frank got onto the verandah, but not that dark. There was colour. The dogs went quiet, and they all put their ears up — and when they saw it was *him*, all of them, every single one just tensed up, and waited. Frank could see them tremble. He tried to whistle like Derek had, those three notes — but he could hear he wasn't doing it properly, and the dogs started growling — one at a time in the beginning, but then just one big noise, louder and wilder than Frank ever thought ten dogs could sound.

He ran, right to the end of the verandah — and he jumped over the little wall and kept running, in a straight line. He only stopped running when he got a stitch. He stopped, and tried to keep upright, with his arms above his head — and he looked back at the dogs.

They were far away now, but they hadn't given up yet. Frank could tell from the way their feet were slipping they were still running against the chains — and he listened for a while, and he could hear some of them croaking.

He went on, but this time he turned down, straight toward the fence by the road. He was going as quickly as he could, but after a while — maybe he was halfway there — his legs got heavy, and he started to feel his heart beat in his head. He slowed down, and looked back at the dogs again. It was basically the same as earlier, except they were much smaller now, and a few of them were sitting down. He walked on for a while, thinking it might be a good idea for him to make himself throw up, if his heart didn't calm down soon —

And then he heard it, the most horrible sound of his life. It was a loud bang, and then a sliding, quivering sound — that you felt more than you heard. He knew exactly what it was.

He turned and saw one of the big ones coming at him — maybe the boerboel — dragging that pole behind it but coming fast, never mind the pole. He couldn't move for ages — then he remembered he had the gun, and he loaded it and tried to aim, and he even fired — but he didn't see where the bullet went, and the dog kept coming.

Frank threw the gun away and ran. He got all the way to the fence, and he knew from earlier it was barbed wire but that didn't even slow him down, he put his hands right on it and he got one leg up, resting on the top —

When the dog jumped into him, getting some tooth into his calf, and crashing into the fence, sending Frank over the other side. The pole came after the dog, smashing into one of the fence posts, and nearly knocking it out the ground — and the fence sagged, right down. Frank jumped up. The pain in his leg made him go down again — but it didn't matter. The dog wasn't moving at all.

Frank just lay on the ground for a while, breathing. His leg hurt, and he could feel he was full of adrenaline, and that it was making him shake — but at least he didn't feel as much like throwing up. He got himself on his knees, and he crawled like that up the road, keeping close to the grass in case he needed to hide.

While he crawled, Frank could feel the blood from the dogbite running through his sock, into his shoe. It hurt all the time, and he had to take a lot of breaks, but Frank kept crawling — and after a while, the pain in his leg changed. It got dull, and deeper. Aching more than burning. He listened the whole time he crawled, for the sound of the bakkie coming up behind him, or sirens coming the other way.

When he reached the turnoff, he rested for a while on the shoulder, feeling a bit warm for the first time since the drugs. He built himself up to it, then stood up. He stripped off his jacket and the other tops he was wearing, and took off his t-shirt. It was an old one he'd got at a fun run in Sundays River, full of holes, and he ripped it easily from the bottom up to the stitching around the neck. He put his other clothes back on, then tied the t-shirt around his leg a few times, just below the knee. He made it too tight the first time, and he saw the bite open up and a little fresh blood leak out over the dry stuff. It was a bad one — it looked more like he'd been caught in a trap.

He hopped over to the side of the road and broke a branch off some wattle that was growing there. He tested it to make sure it could take a bit of weight, then used it like a cane, and walked slowly back to the road. He knew it was about six kays from where he was back to his place — and going as slowly as he had to, he knew it was going to take him hours.

He walked straight down the middle of the road in the beginning, because it was even, and he could get into a rhythm with the stick where his leg only hurt once in a while, or when he went too fast. He sang to himself while he walked, bits of songs he knew, and he'd also try to make up lyrics as he went along, and fit them with the melody and the rhythm he was keeping with the stick.

He did maybe two kilometres this way — but then at the top of a hill, he saw a truck coming in the distance, and his first instinct was to hide himself. He saw that hill was where the flood trench started, and he went over to the left side of the road, as quickly as he could, and eased himself down the small, steep bank, and ducked down into the ditch. He counted to thirty-eight before the truck went past him. Then he looked up at the bank, and knew it was going to be hell to climb out of, and he knew he'd just have to do the whole thing again and again, every time he saw something coming — so he left his stick behind, and just crawled on through the trench.

He crawled for ages along the cold, damp, red dirt — the sun still hours from coming up behind the hills. He was exhausted, and he could feel, it wasn't just his energy going out of him — it was his spirit, his heart, everything. He thought about what his wife was going to say — home a day late, wallet empty, no car, dirty clothes, probably needing an injection for his leg... He tried to imagine all the things she was going to shout at him, and then he wondered what kind of story he'd be able to come up with — anything, just so he didn't have to tell her since the last time she'd seen him, he'd become the kind of guy who'd rob a drug dealer with a stranger, probably in a stolen bakkie, as well.

Just so he didn't have to tell her he knew now, what it was. That whatever dam he had in him to shore up his weakness — like he must've had, when they had their good years together — that dam's been broken, for a while now already, and his whole life's gone under water.

When he saw the aqueduct up ahead, and above it, by the roadside, the telephone pole and the fence — knowing that beyond all that, was the field, then the fruit trees, then the clinic, and then he was basically home, and there might be police parked outside his house when he got there, and even if there weren't, he had to get ready to *really* lie to Maria — just *knowing* all that right then, stole the last of Frank's effort, and all he could do was crawl a few more metres into the pipe drain, and fall asleep.

He woke up with a dog licking his shoe — it couldn't have been long after he'd passed out, the sky outside the drain was still dark. Just seeing another dog right then made Frank freak out a bit, and he kicked it without really meaning to, and it ran back a few steps, but then came forward again. Frank looked at the dog. It had a long neck and shiny eyes and only one of its ears was cocked, and it was smiling — or that's how it looked. It tried to lick Frank's shoe again. He said "No, boy. Jeez. If there's one thing you *don't* want to do" — and he leaned forward and stroked the dog.

Frank's eyes felt full of sleep, and he had a dry mouth and the beginning of a bad headache. His leg was number than it'd been when he was crawling, and he worried it'd take less weight on it than before. He got out of the aqueduct and pulled himself up, to the side of the road. He limped over to the fence, and got himself through the barbed wire and onto the grass on the other side. Just doing that, was so much it made his face sweat — but the grass was long and full of cold, cold dew — so he couldn't lie down in it and rest. The moon was still out — still round, still bright. Frank wondered if the sun was ever coming up, ever again.

The dog hung around Frank while he limped, slowly, across the field — doing circles, smiling and wagging its long tail, and every once in a while kind of half-closing its eyes and tucking its tail in, and coming forward to get stroked. It kept bringing sticks for Frank to throw, but it could never find them again in the grass.

The dew was soaking Frank's jeans, and making the bite hurt worse — and when he saw a tractor parked in the field, with a pallet attached to it, and a big hessian sack on the pallet, filled with other hessian sacks — he went and got two sacks, and put one on each leg, and tried to tie them around his thighs with a bit of the lining, best he could. "Hey, look boy," he said to the dog. "I'm like a moon man" — and for a while, until the sacks got wet and heavy and itchy, they helped.

He watched the dog while he walked — it ran ahead of him, but never that far, and it'd always come back and circle him a few times, with that look on its face, that just had to be a smile. It was strange, but there was something about the dog that made it so easy for Frank to feel sorry for himself, that sort of *made* him bring to mind all the big things that were wrong in his life — the drinking, the debt, his daughter, who he worried was always going to look sick, his stomach, the way him and Maria were going — and the next time the dog came over to get stroked, he went to his knees and hugged it, and looked straight into its simple, simple eyes and said, "Hey boy? What've you got to say about all this?"

And he knew that talking to the dog was going to make him cry, but he kept going, he said “Hey, mister dog? You’ve caught me at a bad time here. Otherwise I’d play nicely with you, I promise. You don’t mind though, hey boy?” — he was starting to cry, and the dog kept trying to lick his face — “No, you don’t mind,” Frank said.

He’d just let those few tears out like that — when he heard a sound like a cannon going off in the night. The dog barked and the sound rumbled around the valley, but Frank could tell it’d come from the road. He turned and went back with the dog, across the field, past the tractor again. He grabbed four more sacks, so he could change before he made his way back — and do double-bags, the next time.

Long before Frank could see the fence, the dog started acting weird — sitting down often, not wanting to go further, blinking like anything and making scared sounds, from its throat. Frank kept stopping with the dog, and stroking him, and telling him to be brave — but then Frank smelt it, burnt rubber and petrol — and all of a sudden, he thought he could see some smoke in the air, just bits of pale grey, almost like mist. He stripped the wet sacks off his legs, and went as fast as he could across the last bit of the field, not waiting for the dog.

When he got to the fence, he saw a big piece of metal lying twisted and bent in the middle of the road, and bits of glass shining all around on the tar, almost like stars in a black lake. He went through the barbed wire, and he saw that the dog’d caught up to him — but it wouldn’t go through the fence, it just lay down on the other side, with its back to the road. Like telling him it’d wait there.

Frank walked to the road, and saw that the truck had slid into the trench on the other side — but not all the way, its back end was sticking up, over the edge of the aqueduct. He saw then, that was the back door that’d come off, lying behind it there like roadkill.

He balled three of the sacks he was carrying into the last one, and dropped the bundle in the road. He walked toward the truck — and when he got close, his feet started crunching on a lot of broken glass, and the glass felt like it was sticking to the soles of his shoes. The truck was wedged in the trench, halfway to being on its side. Frank saw the driver’s door was bent, almost off its hinge. The cabin light was shining out from inside.

He put his foot on the front wheel and looked in. A guy was inside, in a horrible pose — where his head and his neck and his arms all flopped to one side, but the seatbelt kept him sitting. The guy was old, and he was wearing two bright wool jerseys, a green one, and an orange one underneath. He had a Pirates beanie, and mismatching gloves, and a white beard that was dripping blood onto the passenger seat. Frank saw, he didn’t have a radio in there with him, or anything, really — and as old as he was, and as cold it as it must’ve been in there, Frank thought he’d probably just fallen asleep.

Frank wasn’t sure if the guy was dead, and he didn’t want to touch him — so he got down and went and looked in the headlights for a piece of glass to hold under the guy’s nose and check for breathmist. He’d seen that in a movie on tv the other week. He picked one up that was smooth and curved, and covered in something sticky.

“Shit,” he said. “It’s honey. It’s fucking *honey*,” he said — it seemed magical to him, and he went straight to the back of the truck, and climbed inside the cargo area. In the moonlight, he could see boxes in a heap in the back corner, and some open boxes lying around as well, and lots of small jars, gleaming softly. He remembered how much he loved honey, growing up, but how they only ever had it in the house when someone was sick — and he couldn’t stop himself, he put six jars in his pockets, for home. He picked up another few jars, just to carry back with him in his hands, and looked at them. They were small, but they were packaged nicely — in dark glass, with black and gold labels saying GOURMET KAROO ORANGEBLOSSOM HONEY — and they already had prices on the lids, forty bucks a shot.

Frank got back on the road, and started thinking about where he could go to call someone, to tell them about the truck — or if he should just wait there, and wave down the next car he saw, or what —

When he saw the sack he’d dropped in the road, lying there in the moonlight, glowing like a treasure bag in a storybook. He turned the honey jars over in his hands a few times — but that was more like letting his body catch up with the idea — his mind, was already wild with it. He looked up at the sky, which was bright and beautiful, and prussian blue — and he said, out loud, “Okay, tell me if I mustn’t” — and he stood there for minutes, with his eyes fixed on the small white stars, watching for one of them to move, or to flash at him, or anything. After a while, he started thinking about it the other way, like what’d he done to *deserve* it — and he kept trying to read the stars, but they stayed just like they were, and in the end, he just smiled, and said “It’s fine — you’re also allowed to get lucky, Frank.”

He went back to the driver’s door, and climbed on the wheel again. He breathed on the fingers of his right hand, then lifted them up and down at the knuckles for a while, and breathed on them some more. Then he reached out and put his fingers on the man’s neck, just to make sure. He couldn’t feel a pulse, even with his fingers there for a minute, maybe longer.

He went back to the road and got the sacks. He made two double-bags, and then he climbed back into the cargo area, and started filling the bags with the honeyjars. At first, he was counting them as he went — but he got too excited, and too worried about if someone came to keep track. He knew he must’ve had two hundred of the tiny things though, at least. He did the sum, four times two is eight, eight grand — that was the shoebox, Frank thought, and that was if he even sold it — maybe he’d just let his daughter grow up in a house full of fancy honey for a few years, instead.

The bags were very heavy, and he struggled to put them down on the road gently. Before he hoisted them up on his shoulders, he stood in the road, and closed his eyes, and just let himself worry for a while — Frank decided, that was going to be his test. He worried about being able to carry the load, with his leg like it was, and about what what he’d say if someone saw him, and about if Maria was going to approve, and about how embarrassing it’d be — if it ever got into the paper or something, Frank Rose stealing honey from a dead guy’s truck...

He brought all these things to mind, and kept waiting for his stomach to flare up — and that old, scared feeling to come back, and freeze him up. He waited, but Frank found himself breathing just

fine — and when he looked down at the bags again, it was like he could *feel* the muscles in his back telling him they were strong enough. He felt in the grip of a brand new feeling — like what did it matter, so *what*, even if he got scared along the way? What could even *touch* him, now? It was too late, the honey was in the bags already, and his new dog was waiting for him by the fence over there, and Maria and his baby girl were waiting for him at home — never mind how they'd be, they'd be there — and the moon was still out, just for him to see his way home by, that hot, bright colour, like a gas ring turned on full.

University of Cape Town

THE MOVERS

The light that looks like a petrol pump had been on for two hours, and I think I'd measured thirty-nine kays on the reserve tank by the time we were done with them — a new record for the van. We only saw them right at the end of it all, when we brought the fridge and the pool table. They were young girls — probably, they saw the advert Simon put up on campus. All four of them were beautiful, and you could tell they were rich, and mean — the first thing they did when they saw us, they laughed to each other. We guessed it was how young we were, the clothes we had on, probably also that we had no blacks with us.

I told Simon to get the money from them, and he came back with an envelope that had THE MOVERS written on it — with the letters all nicely decorated, and a little cartoon of a guy with a piano on his back drawn on the corner where the stamp normally goes.

"Did you check it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you count it in front of them?"

"No," Simon said. "Look, it's sealed."

"Open it now."

"They're looking."

"So?"

"I can't now. It'll look like we don't trust them."

"I don't trust them."

"Why not?"

"*Look* at them," I said. "They're trouble."

"Let's just drive around the corner. I'll count it then."

"I'm scared it won't start. Why don't they just go inside? What are they looking at?"

"Can't you roll it?" he asked. "It's a pretty steep road."

"Ja, but am I really going to roll it while they're watching?"

"Who cares? We'll never see them again," he said — and he was right. I never see girls like that twice.

I rolled us down the road toward town, and we waved out the window at them. I looked in the rearview mirror and they were pointing at something — maybe the duct tape I had to put on the cargo

door the other week — and they were laughing some more. “Whatever, bitches,” I said. “If you had any friends they could of *walked* your shit across for you.”

“That’s true, hey,” Simon said. “It was an easy one today. Just the stairs were shit.”

“Count the cash,” I said.

Simon counted it, and I rolled the van through about three stopstreets onto Upper Orange, and then further down the hill. “Hey,” I said. “If it’s green at the bottom, do you think I’ll be able to get right to the Engen without starting?”

Simon said, “Fuck, definitely.”

“Did they cough it all up?” I asked him.

“Actually,” he said. “It’s more than they owed. I was going to ask if we should go back, after we get petrol and stuff.”

“Why?”

“To give them change.”

“*Fuck* that,” I said. “They can do without it — why did they call *us*, anyway? Is it five hundred?”

“Six.”

“Jeez, that’s great.”

We went past that church before the robots. The lights were on inside, so you could really see Mother Mary there in the big window — you could even see that sad look she has in her eyes, and everything. I saw the robot at the bottom of the road was green, and I stopped tapping on the brakes. “Think I’ll make it?” I said.

“Go for it,” Simon said — but just when I started to get some real speed going, the light went orange.

Simon shouted “Go!” and laughed — at the same time that I stamped on the brakes, and they moaned, and the whole van felt like it was going to shake itself to pieces. We stopped over the line, hanging into traffic.

I tried to start the van twice before the lights went green for the other cars, but it wouldn’t turn over. The cars went past hooting at us, and people were flipping us zap signs like anything, and a couple of them even shouted out their windows. I kept trying the engine — but it wouldn’t start, and then I started to worry that I’d probably flooded it by then, anyway. I told Simon to get out the van, and be ready to push it when we started rolling.

When the lights changed again, we had a flashing arrow — so I just put on my emergency lights, and I let down the handbrake, and steered through the intersection while Simon ran behind, and pushed. Cars coming up Hope Street flew past us, hooting. We got through the turn into the crossroad, and then into the lane for the petrol station on the corner — and then, out of nowhere, there was a rise in the road, and I felt we were about to roll back, so I pulled up the handbrake. When I got out, Simon was still in the road, leaning on the back of the van — sweating, and breathing like he’d just been pulled up from drowning.

“Fucking hell,” he said. “Fuck! Why can’t anyone just be fucking nice about *anything*?”

"They're all bastards, hey. Sorry about that."

"No worries. Shit, I thought it was going to roll for a second there — that was nice, with the handbrake. I was ready to bail."

"Ja, I know. Fucking speedbump," I said. "Come, I'll ask one of the dudes there to steer, and I'll help push." In the end, we backed up traffic again — and four of the petrol guys had to come over and help us push the thing next to a pump. I put fifty bucks in the van, and then went and bought two six-packs from a Tops down the road.

When I got back to the van, I said to Simon, "You know what we're doing with the extra?"

"What you thinking? Town?"

"Casino," I said.

"Yes!"

"But just with the two hundred."

"No problem," he said. "We'll drink at your place first."

"Can Ian come?"

"Is he in town?"

"Ja, he got a lift through with a mate," I said.

"How long's it been since you saw him last?"

"Shit — like a year, hey. We were talking about it last night," I said. Then I told Simon, "Our ma's giving him money again."

"Why's she doing that?"

"This time, it was for a haircut."

"No, but you guys can't spend that."

"I cut his hair."

Simon laughed. "That's brilliant," he said. "How's it look?"

"I think it's shit, but Ian says he likes it. Whatever, obviously I'm letting him keep the cash — he needs it, man. The fucker's lost like three teeth."

"Rough," Simon said. "Do you think we've got enough booze, if Ian's here?"

"No, Ian's not drinking at the moment," I said — and I couldn't look at Simon when I said it, for ages, I just kept my eyes on the road.

"Oh, shit," he said.

"Ja," I said. "I know."



We went back to my place, and hung out with Ian, and drank. Simon was telling us about his course. Ian didn't speak much the whole time — but he was seeming alright, like at least he was listening, and sort of following along.

At one point, I went and showered and shaved and everything — and I spent a long time getting dressed, and trying to make my hair look good. While I was busy, I started thinking about roulette, and winning money — and for some reason, it was ridiculous, but I imagined myself winding up at the end of the night with one of those girls whose stuff we moved, the redhead.

Simon'd laughed at Ian's hair when he saw him — so while I was busy changing, Ian came and knocked on my door, and asked to borrow a cap. I showed him the only one I had — and when he still wanted to wear it, even though it had sweat stains on the base of the peak — I swear, I felt so bad about cutting his hair, and doing such a bad job, that all I could think about was our mother, and what she'd say if she knew what I'd done. I could almost *hear* all that stuff from the bible, just raining down on me — and then Ian asked me if he could borrow the van.

"To go where?" I asked him.

"Just to a friend's, here in Mowbray. Fifteen minutes."

"Bullshit," I said. "You're going to try cop."

"No, man," Ian said.

"You are, Ian."

"Whatever," he said. "Just leave it."

"Ja, that's right — just leave it," I said.



I was a bit drunk by the time we got in the van to go, so I drove slowly out to the casino. The industrial places by the highway were dark, and we could see the casino lights from a long way off — and they were nice, they made me feel good. Simon was sitting up front with me, and he told me about all the lights he'd seen in Korea — about how neon can hurt your eyes when there's so much of it, and how in the rain, sometimes it'd smoke and crackle, right there above your head. Ian was in the back, but we had the thing open so he could stick his head into the cab. He didn't say anything the whole way.

We just parked in a street close to Voortrekker Road because sometimes, when I go in the van to nice places, they don't let me in the parking lots. It was a dark street, with a small field and some trees — like a park — on the corner. In the middle of the park, there was a tall security light — and it was raining while we walked, so the thing was glowing like a sun — and you could see people sleeping, right there on the grass in the rain, and two guys sitting on a bench, drinking straight from a papsak, and coughing after every sip.

When we got inside, just before I went to the cashier, Ian gave me the hundred from our ma for his haircut — and really, he *insisted* that I bought chips with it. I got the three hundred in fifteen twenty-chips, and I kept five of them in my pocket for Ian — and just gave ten to Simon.

The way Simon and I play roulette now was my idea. The first time we came, we were too excited, we just put all our money on red — and we lost it right away, it probably took five seconds. Then, afterwards, while we were drinking, I came up with the new way — and really, it works, we've used it every time since. We play the columns, with a bet on two out of the three, and double the money on one of them. That way — since you're always betting some of your money against yourself — if you lose it all, it's fucking unlucky.

The first round, we asked Ian to pick two columns. He chose first and third, twenty and forty, and it came up 2. He looked destroyed when it happened — but we told him, it just does sometimes. Then Simon chose columns two and three, for twenty and forty, and the ball stuck in 19. He swore fucking loud, and kicked his chair, and a guy in a suit came over and told him to cool it. We had eighty left, so I decided to go one and two, for twenty and sixty — and we lost that one, as well.

"Right — let's go drink," I said, as soon as I saw the guy rake our chips.

"No ways," Simon said. "I got an sms from the bank earlier. My folks put cash in my account — we can draw that, for sure. It'll be like four hundred, I think."

"No, leave it. We said we'd just use the extra from those girls."

"It's fine, seriously. I have enough — the money's for jeans. I don't need jeans. Come on man, it's not like it was the first time, when we just wanted to do it like Hooker. You remember that? *That* was stupid. This is your *system*, man — it's like a one in three-times-three-times-three chance we haven't won anything already."

He went off, and while he was gone, Ian tugged at my sleeve — honestly, just like a little kid — and he told me, "I hope he can draw it, it's fun here at the table." Simon came back in ten minutes with a plastic carrier, stacked with twenty-chips. He said he wanted to do it betting sixty and one-twenty at a time. To help us decide where to put the bets, we flipped a coin matching the columns up against each other — so they all played each other once, and we chose the two that both beat the other one.



Later, when we were drunk, and we'd already spent most of what we'd earned moving those girls in — Simon told us he'd worked it out, and that it was a one in 243 chance we'd ever lose five times in a row like that again. He was acting happy about it — but I don't know, it just pissed me off to think about it that way. Ian was quiet the whole time — but restless also, I could tell, even though he was quiet, I could see he *wanted* something. I was especially drunk because I'd dropped a hundred bucks at the bar buying shots from promotion girls — and because I didn't tell Simon and Ian about them, because I felt so bad — I was a little quiet, too, and I was thinking a lot.

Simon went off to talk to some girls at a table at one point, so I was alone with Ian at the bar for a while. I tried to talk to him about some stuff — but really, he seemed happier being quiet. Looking at

him, just staring off like he was, like a fish or something — it really made me think about him, then. And about our mother, as well, and then other things came, too — probably stuff I'd never ever thought about before. I realised that the six hundred we got that day took us to five grand in four months — and how I still owed twelve on the van, and on top of that, how the fucking thing was starting to fall apart on me. I realised it was a bad idea, the whole thing, from the start — and now it had me more or less under a rock — and I dwelt on that, and it took me a long way down. I got a prickly feeling everywhere on my skin — even while I sat deadstill there at the bar with Ian.

I had to order myself a shot, just for something else to think about — and I bought the most expensive pack of cigarettes of my life from behind the bar, and I told Ian to come with me to the balcony. We had to go past the video slots to get there — and fuck, the faces you see in front of *those* things, they didn't help the way I was feeling, let's just say that. I remember, outside, it'd stopped raining — but the wind was up, and it was freezing — and being in it, felt like it put me about three or four drinks back.

While we smoked, we looked out at a ship in Table Bay. There was just one of them out there — just one light, like a candle, burning in a whole black sea. We were almost finished the cigarettes, before Ian said — really, from nowhere — “Can I come stay and work with you?”

I asked him, “What about your course?”

“I'll never pass in a million years. Actually, I think I've failed already.”

“You don't want to work with me,” I said. “It's kak work — and I'm broke.”

“Ja, but look at you. You're doing *something*, at least.”

“I won't be for much longer, though — really, Ian, I need a new idea.”

“But you'll have one,” Ian said. “You always do. I'll do whatever you do.”

I sort of just let it die — and got another cigarette out, and lit it. While I smoked, I watched Ian go over to the far edge of the balcony — and lean over the rail, looking at the buildings across the road. He called me over to look at something about halfway through my cigarette.

From where we were, we saw right into a woman's flat. She was probably thirty-five, or forty — and she was sitting on her bed, and looking at herself in a mirror. She had her back to us, but we could see her face in the mirror — and we kept waiting for her to do something, but she was so patient — she just stared, and stared. It was like she was *watching* herself, and it was so weird, the weirdest thing in a fucking weird day — and there just something about it that I couldn't take anymore. “You have bad days too,” I said. “Hey Ian? Maybe she's just had a bad day. It's late now — maybe she's just come home from somewhere, and it didn't go like she wanted it to, and she's just getting at peace about it before bed, or something. But what the *fuck* is she looking at? Jesus. It doesn't *mean* anything, hey? It's not all just fucked for her or anything, hey?”

Ian said, “She'll be fine when she goes to sleep” — and I swear to God, the way he said it, like he *knew* — it almost made me cry. I had to turn away from him, just to make sure I didn't.

I put my hand in my pocket to get my phone, so I could check the time — and when I did, I felt the chips from earlier, from that hundred for Ian's hair. “Hey Ian, you know one way you could help

me make some money?" I said — and I showed him the stack of chips. "Pick a number." We went downstairs and fetched Simon, and we went to a table. I took the chips out of my pocket, and we put them all on 22.



About twenty minutes after that, I was walking around finishing a last beer — and a guy with a suit came and put his hand on my shoulder, and told me to follow him. I freaked out, but I couldn't understand why I'd be in trouble — we'd lost everything we'd bet, the whole night. I worried they saw me take the chips out of my pocket, and maybe they thought I'd stolen them from someone.

I went into a room, and there was another guy in a suit — except a better suit, and his tie was loose, and he was sitting behind a really big, nice desk. As soon as the door closed, the guy I was following asked me if I wanted a drink. I said no, because I was scared — but the guy behind the desk just gave me a really nice smile, and told me they "valued my business." It was those words — and then he leaned forward and slid an envelope over to me, across the desk. I just looked at it, until he said "Come, it's yours — have a great night." I picked it up, and I looked over at the first guy again, who also just smiled at me — and then opened the door and held it open, like I could go.

My heart was still beating like a fucking hummingbird's — and I went straight to the bathroom, I didn't even know I could walk that fast — and I went into a stall, and opened the envelope. Inside was two thousand rand, in cash. All hundreds — I fanned them out and counted them, five times. And I don't know why, but I still felt panicked about it — like, somehow, it was still stealing — so I took a thousand out, and I put it in my underpants. Then I folded the rest into two wads, and hid them in my fists. I found Simon and Ian together in the bar — and I put the money in their hands, and I remember, I said "Come, just trust me. Just follow me, come, back to the van."

We spoke about it on the way back from the casino — why they'd have done something like that. Ian guessed it was because they didn't want me to kill myself. Simon said, "No, man. They've picked you. They've got you picked as a Gambler — they probably thought you were going to blow the two grand *there*, in like an hour or something."

I'd been quiet, just trying to enjoy everything as much I could. Simon'd called a guy about drugs — and that was probably what it was, more than the thing with the casino, that had Ian so happy, and talking so much — and we made a quick stop in Green Point to pick them up, and then we took them in the van while we were still in the guy's driveway. When I finally got a turn to guess, we were coming down from High Level — and town was just a pool of lights, and the way it just *sat* there at the bottom of the hill, we all got it, this feeling like we were in a plane, coming in to land — and I said, "Simon, you know what it was, at the casino? It's simple. Things *balance*, man. We're not Gamblers, and we're not going to kill ourselves — whatever we are — Movers, it doesn't matter. Tonight's just our turn to win."



The next morning I woke up early, because things were banging in the kitchen. I had a horrible headache, and a poisoned feeling — and I felt like if I didn't drink water right away, I was probably never going to be able to swallow ever again. I got out of bed, and I saw I still my shoes and my jeans on — and I just went through to the kitchen like that.

I knew there would of been dirty dishes in the sink, and I thought that's what Ian was doing in there —but actually, he was cooking. He was wearing the shirt *I* had on the night before, I don't know where he must've found it — and he was sort of talking to himself, softly, and smiling about something, and breaking eggs into a bowl. His hair was messy, and it looked better that way.

"What's that?" I said.

"Oh, hey. You had some stuff in the fridge."

"Ja, great. How you feeling?"

"Hundreds. You?"

"Like shit," I said — and then I drank as much water as I could from the tap. The water was cold, and I felt it sliding down into my stomach — and I worried if I was going to be able to keep it down. "Jesus," I said. "You know, I probably wouldn't be surprised no matter *how* much you told me I drank last night."

Ian laughed, and said, "The drive home was funny."

"Did we *take* anything else?"

"Just me and Simon did — we couldn't find you."

"Who drove us home?"

"You, man," Ian said.

"Shit. That's not good," I said — and then I started running water into the sink, for the dishes.

I was feeling worse and worse the longer I was awake. I kept getting spit in my mouth, like I was about to throw up — and the noise I was making with the dishes was ridiculous, it was like a constant roar. I'd done most of them, when I started hearing something else — Ian, singing. I looked at him bent over the counter, he was cutting onions and wiping tears away, and singing — and it made me think of doing chores with him in our last few years at home, after our mom decided it wasn't okay to have a maid anymore, and we basically did everything in the house when we got home from school. I remembered how badly we wanted out of there — especially Ian — and then I realised that was only four years ago, that was all, and that made me feel bitter. I felt like I *saw* right then, that along the way, both us'd been cheated out of something — even if I wasn't sure what it was.

I let the water out the sink while I wiped the cutlery — and then Ian said he was ready to start frying things, so I handed him a pan. He found some spices in a cupboard that I'd forgotten about — he had to bang the bottles against the counter to loosen the stuff inside. The spices smelled good in the

oil, even though I didn't really feel like eating — and I watched Ian bending over the steam, breathing it in and smiling, still singing to himself, a bit — and I swear, I felt so proud of him right then.

"Ian," I said.

"Yip?"

"You want to call mom later?"

"Why?"

"Well, it'd be nice for her."

"I don't know," he said. "I'm in such a good mood. And it's a Sunday — I don't want her to get onto the God stuff, and bum me out."

"Ja, but she'll like it that we're together."

"No, she won't," he said. "She'll get hectic — you know she will."

"Fuck it, then," I said. "I'm feeling kak, anyway. How are you doing this?"

"What?"

"Cooking, singing — all of it."

"This? This is nothing," Ian said. "We were home before the sun was even up. Go lie down, I'll bring you food just now."

He started singing again — and then I just said it, before I even planned to — I said, "Hey Ian, are you *really* alright?"

"Hundreds," he said. "It's nice being in your kitchen."

"No I mean, like, *overall*. Are you alright?"

"Hey," he said — and it's one of the last things I can remember him saying to me. "I do what I do. It goes up and down."



I got a phonecall from my mother about two weeks later. She told me she'd checked Ian into rehab in Natal — into this place where no money, no phones, no computers, no books and even no music was allowed. She asked me to take the van through to Stellenbosch, and move his things out of the house he'd been living in. She told me he had a small table of hers that she wanted back — and if I could sell the other stuff, I could keep half of whatever I got for it. She gave me the address, and some phone numbers for the people he'd been living with.

I phoned all the numbers, but I could only get hold of one of the guys. I had to phone him five times before he answered — and then the conversation got weird, quickly — and he ended up saying he never even lived there at all, then hanging up, and never answering again.

Ian's suburb was nice — nice as some of the places in Cape Town. I'm not sure when it happened, or how or why or whatever, but my life has brought me to a place where I spend a lot of time looking at other people's houses — I mean even when I'm not working, I do it now — and

probably I can't even help myself anymore, dreaming about what it'd be like to live in them. Some times, the dreams *hurt* they're so good — like with those girls we moved up in Oranjezicht — and other times, I swear, you just get so happy for what you've got. Like once, I had to get a fridge out of a place that had an owl living in it somewhere — a big bird, at least, there were feathers and bones and old piles of shit lying all over the floor — and there were children, probably six of them running around inside, and virtually no furniture, just a guy sitting on a beercrate in front of a tv, set up on another beercrate.

That was a bad one — but I promise, Ian's place might of even been worse.

In a street of white houses, it was so dirty, it looked about a thousand years old. It looked — really — it looked like a witch's house. The roof was fucked and crooked, and the gutter hung off it, and banged against a wall when the wind blew. There were two broken windows, with cardboard in them, and the front door was off one of its hinges — and I promise, you could smell the place from the street.

I went in, and I looked around — but I couldn't even tell which one was Ian's room. They all just had a mattress in them, basically, maybe some bedding, but I can't remember. There was no table in the whole place — there was nothing, just filthy fucking walls, and stuff, useless stuff, lying on all the floors. There were some pots and pans in the kitchen, and a little gas stove — but there were cockroaches everywhere, and the stuff was so dirty, I didn't even want it to go in the van. I ended up leaving the place with nothing.

On the way back to the van, I started thinking, Maybe some homeless people'd moved in a few days after Ian'd gone away to Natal — after burglars'd stripped it, and got vindictive, and fucked it up a little. I remember really *wanting* to think that's how it happened — but I knew it didn't really feel that way, it felt slower than that.

While I drove, I thought of my brother in Natal — I saw him there, being quiet all day, doing the whole thing like it was just prison, for a while — and I got terrified for him, and I worried, really, right then I worried it was all my fault. I worried about when he'd seen mom, and she'd seen the haircut I'd given him, and probably heard all about the night at the casino — or else, just imagined worse — and I worried about the things she would've said, and the names she would've called us both, and how Ian would've just sat there, and taken it, and just packed his bags when she told him to. And I was angry, in the beginning, but then I wondered about what if our ma was actually right, what if she'd seen all this coming somehow — I mean from a long way back — if she'd seen it in us from when we were kids, probably from when we moved out of dad's place, and she had us around her all the time and started going crazy about church. I worried that's why she's always prayed for us so much, and the rest of the way home I worried about what she saw still coming for me.

KING OF THE ROAD

Since I've been on my own, one thing I do quite a lot, is I go to the movies. Even though that always used to be Pettie's thing — her and the kids, they loved watching movies.

So like at the end of January, when the money came into my account on a Monday. I remember how it happened. I had the easy shift, ten to four, so I was feeling good about that, plus the weather was so nice, I even walked to work. And then I got my slip, as soon as I got to the depot. I remember the day dragged a bit after that, but not like it drags some days — just because it was hot, and because I spent the whole time thinking about what I was going to do when work was finished.

It turned into one of those hot nights, with a hot, salty wind — and I was still at home, but I was feeling desperate to go somewhere I might see someone. I was even wondering about a bar, but the only people who drink on Mondays are people who drink every day, or else they're young — so I went to the movies again, all by myself.

I put on a nice shirt, and I went to the expensive movies at the Waterfront, because the women are always better looking there. I didn't know what to see or anything, but one of them had Cape Town on the poster — it had to be, it was that square where you turn down to the station off Darling, with the statues, full of pigeons. I waited to get my ticket just in case I saw someone going to see something else, but no one came. I nearly just went home. It's funny to think about that, now, but I remember — I nearly went home.

When I paid for my ticket, they showed me the screen so I could choose my seat — and they were all empty, I could have any one I wanted. I went in the middle. The movie was okay in the beginning, quite boring, and it was strange being in there by myself — but that all stopped, about twenty minutes through. That was when Victoria came on the screen.

I didn't know who she was then, obviously — I had to check in the paper when I got home — and I mean, it's not like I've never seen a beautiful woman in a movie before. But *her*, even though she looked like girls I might've noticed around Crawford when I was growing up, the ones with nice shoes, always wearing dresses, and she talked a bit like them too — maybe it's just because she was like them, but *she'd* made it into a movie, I don't know — but I was sitting there in the movie house, alone in there, and I could *feel* myself falling in love with her. She wasn't in the movie lots, but you couldn't take your eyes off her when she was. You even saw her naked, just once, quickly.

I don't know if other people fall in love with movie stars. I mean really in love. I've always had this thing where I daydream about women I see — even those ten years with Pettie, I did it, and before that, when I was young, it was girls. But it was always people from real life before, and except the once, I never let myself even hope for something to happen. I dream the same way about cars and stuff, too — houses, jobs, anything — just dreams where something *comes* to me, and things change, all at once, and forever after.

It was maybe three days after I'd seen the movie. I have this mug, Pettie gave it to my daughter, the young one, to give to me when I hit forty — it's just a white mug, and it's been glued back together twice — but it says KING OF THE ROAD on it in red and yellow letters, and it's the only thing I ever got from my daughter, and I suppose I don't even know why I do it any more really, but every morning, I take it out my locker and I put some prestik on the bottom and I put it up on the little shelf under the ticket machine when I get in the bus. So sometimes, when it's a bus that really rattles, shakes like anything when you're idling, I have to do this thing when I stop — where I just keep one hand on the steering wheel, and reach over and hold down the mug, otherwise it falls, and it can break. I was doing that, that morning — I'd pulled over by the post office there in Woodstock — I was pushing the mug back down into the prestik when I looked up and I saw her, I mean Victoria, the girl from the movie, I saw her right there on the other side of the cage, standing there with her hand full of change.

It's always so impossible to actually *do* anything, when something like that happens to you. You're always just wondering if it's even happening, and then it's too late already. I think I just said Good morning, and then I counted her money and put it in the change rack. But she was one of those people who put their hands under the cage to get their ticket — so I sort of had to touch her fingers, just a little, when I gave it to her.

There was a church service going on the bus that morning, and that always makes it feel nice in there — when they sing, those voices, it just feels like water, flowing over you — and I watched her the whole way in my mirror, she stayed standing, but she closed her eyes and listened to the singing, with a big smile on her face. She didn't go far, just to Buchanan Square.

I've seen thousands and thousands of beautiful women get on the bus — every day, I promise, you see one you'd cut a finger off to be with for a while. But Victoria, really, even if I never knew she was from the movies, I could see there was something different with her. That face, and that kind of glow she had, like she had a bright light shining just underneath her skin — you had to believe something *made* that, God, whatever, just something that loved her, and loved me enough to put her on the bus that morning, with the singing and everything going on.

After she got off, I had about an hour to go before I was finished. I wasn't concentrating on anything for a while — I could feel myself going too fast between the robots, and I missed someone's stop, even though they said they'd been ringing the bell. I tried to calm myself down by doing like I normally do when I'm bored — I read the headlines the newspapers put up on the lamp posts, and I try make up stories to fit the headlines — but it didn't work. I was in already. Already, she felt like the only thing — the first thing — I'd ever *really* wanted from the world, and all those same feelings came

with, where it's like you didn't know it before, but actually you've been in a box, a dark box, and now someone's come and put a key in the lock, and now there's light coming in, flooding in.



I looked for Victoria at the bus stop every morning for two weeks. It got to where I'd slow down, nearly stop, even if no one rang the bell and there was no one on the bench outside the post office — slow right down and just look in the side mirror, in case she was coming round the corner, and I could wait.

When I did see her again, that moment —

The morning it happened, I was crazy, I packed my work clothes into a bag, and I went to Woodstock and parked my car at Tollgate, then just walked up and down Main Road and some of the other streets, all day — looking in some of the shops sometimes, but mainly, just looking for her. I had lunch at a place and I bought a paper, and I must've spent hours, just sitting on those benches outside the post office, trying to do crosswords, and I don't know why it felt like it did but I was *waiting* for her, the whole time — I was *expecting* her — just to come round the corner, or get off a bus, come out a shop, whatever. I don't know if other people do stuff like that — I mean, with women. I'll never do it again. No matter even if I get so lost again, I won't.

I was sunburnt and tired when I got in the bus, and traffic was hell in the beginning. But then, at about six, just when things were getting better on the road, and I could feel I was going to start dwelling on stuff — and this never happens, it must've just been too hot that day — but these thick clouds starting boiling up in the sky, even the sky out over the bay, dark clouds. And then it rained — but thick rain, with a bit of thunder, and steam coming off the streets, everything. I heard someone call one of them a cloudburst once, which makes sense — and it all cleared away before it was even dark, and I remember how good that whole feeling was, driving slowly through the city, hardly anyone on the bus, with this golden green light outside, and everything, I mean even the gutters, looking clean and fresh.

Things were okay after then — I felt calm, and time went quickly. Before I knew it, it was after ten already, and there were only two people on the bus — and I didn't have to pick anyone up anymore, if I didn't want to. I had the OFF DUTY sign on. But I'd had such a good evening, after such a bad day, that just before the bridge on Strand Street, I saw this one person sitting alone in one of those little bus shelters — and I think I remember thinking to myself, Well, that's not a great part of the city to be alone in, especially *after* ten o'clock — and I remember feeling really good about it, pulling over and stopping, anyway.

You can guess who it was.

The second the doors went open, and the reflection disappeared and the streetlights came into the bus, as soon she stood up — I swear, I could even tell from her *shadow*, it was her. Can you imagine

how that felt? I've been having these dreams about that moment, and I hope I have them for the rest of my life — these dreams where I'm dying, sometimes I'm just old, once a guy shot me, once I drove my car off Boyes Drive, on purpose — but when I'm dying, I mean right at the end there, I suppose it's an angel, that comes to me and tells me I can have one moment of my life back, just one, before it's all finished, she tells me you get the moment back with all the feelings just the same as they were, and I've had the dream four or five times now, and every time, I get to see Victoria again like that, and I wake up feeling better.

She came up to the cage — and she was as beautiful as before, of course, but it looked like she might've been crying that evening.

She said, "I don't think I have enough money to go home with."

I told her, "Well I'm off duty, so you don't even need a ticket."

She smiled at me, then. I watched her go sit down, near the front on the left side, which was perfect, because I knew I'd be able to see her in my mirror the whole way.

You should've seen how slowly I drove between town and Woodstock. I even thought to myself, If I could've pretended there was something wrong with the bus, and we had to stop — if I could've got away with pretending we'd broken down, without getting found out, and without getting into trouble — that would've been the thing to do. But I didn't even have to, I didn't have to do anything like that. Just the way things happened by themselves — for a while, it was all perfect.

In my mirror, I watched her fall asleep, with her hand on the glass and her face on her hand, somewhere between the bridge and Searle Street. I knew the other guys on the bus were going to Mowbray, and then I'd have to bring the bus back to Tollgate, anyway — so I just drove straight through Woodstock, then Salt River, Observatory, keeping it about thirty-five, that nice speed where the bus just hums, and it feels like you're on the train.

The whole way, I practised some of the things I was going to say to her when she woke up. When we got to Mowbray I pulled over by the police station, and turned on all the lights inside the bus. I was about to call "Last stop" — but then I saw she'd woken up. I opened the doors, and sat there.

The other two guys got out. I saw one of them walk straight over to a taxi and get into it, and drive off. The other guy went into the 7 Eleven and came out smoking a cigarette, then went and sat down outside the place, with his back against the wall, and his legs stretched out on the pavement.

She said "Excuse me, where are we?"

"Mowbray," I said.

"Shit," she said. "Is the bus finished now?"

"Ja, this was the last stop," I said. And I could see her face, in the mirror, and she was looking at me, and even though it was part of my plan, making her worry a bit about getting home — actually *doing* it, didn't feel nice. I let it go for only five seconds or something, then I said "Why, where do you live?"

"Back in Woodstock."

"Okay, I think we can make a plan," I said. "But one condition."

"What?" she said.

I said, "You have to come sit here in the handicap seat and talk to me on the way back."

She smiled. Then she said "Okay, but one condition yourself. You let me go get something from the shop quickly."

I told her that was fine, I had to turn the bus around, anyway.

I put the CHARTERED sign on, just in case she'd notice, and I picked her up at a stop on the other side of the road.

She sat down on the big seat at the front.

"Wow, this is great," she said. "This is actually comfortable."

I didn't know what to say. I saw she got a Rocky Road from the shop, so I said, "Do you like ginger beer?"

She said, "I like it with vodka" — and I promise, right there, she got a little bottle out her bag, and poured some into the Rocky Road. Then she put the vodka away, and put her thumb on the top of the other bottle, and swirled it a bit. Then she drank, and closed her eyes and made a face.

"Strong?" I said.

"No, just perfect. Want some?"

"I try not to," I said.

"Because you're driving?"

"Ja," I said. "That also."

I smiled at that, but she didn't. She just took another big sip, then she said "So you going to drive, or what?"

"What's your name, first," I said.

She told me it was Victoria.

I said, "Hi Victoria, I'm Peter" — and then I put the bus in gear, and we started moving.

We went straight into a red robot, so I said, "You know what I do for a job, what do you do?"

She said, "I'm a performer."

"A performer? You mean like an actress?" I said.

"Same thing," she said — and then she told me about some stuff she'd done. She talked about some plays, and she told me about some poems she'd read for some poet, that got recorded and put on a cd. Then she said, "I was also in a movie, but you probably haven't seen it."

"Ja, I've been busy," I said.

To tell you the truth, all I was really thinking about at that point — it's another problem I have, all the life seems to go out of things before they're even finished, with me — I was worrying that we were already at Pick N Pay, there in Observatory, so that meant the trip was about a third gone already, and I hadn't done anything yet.

"What's it like?" I said.

"What?"

"Being in movies."

"It's fun," she said. "Is your job fun?"

"No, it's not fun. But I like it."

She said, "Isn't it boring?"

And I took that as my opportunity. I stopped the bus underneath a streetlight, and turned a bit in my seat, so we could almost see each other properly, even through the cage.

I said, "Victoria, how could it be boring? Every day, you're seeing people. Some people you know, you remember them, but then this day they're sad, and the other day they were happy. Or else they've cut their hair or something, it's always different, it's like a show. And then you see strangers — they don't even *look* at you, strangers. I promise Victoria, sometimes I can spend all day feeling like *I'm* in a movie, driving the bus. Even like I'm the camera."

I couldn't tell if she was scared, because we'd stopped, or if she was interested. She took another sip of her drink, so I kept telling her, about the signs, and the patterns you see — how you can make up stories about everyone, and link them all together, and how some days, it's true, the grey, windy ones, *everyone's* depressed — and how after a while, you start feeling on the road when something's wrong up ahead, you start knowing about accidents before you see a thing, before you even hear the sirens. And I told her how scary it is sometimes, in traffic, and I told her about how close you can feel to people, sometimes, when you catch them in a moment where they can't help themselves — even though they're on the bus, they just have to cry or shout or something.

And you know what she said then? She said, "You have too much time on your hands, Peter. I bet you don't have a wife."

I felt my face get hot and I sat back behind the wheel, so I wasn't looking at her anymore.

I put the bus back in gear, and we went past the hospital, and past Durham Avenue before I said anything again.

I looked at her in the mirror — she was drinking, and staring out the window on her side — and I said, "Where do you stay?"

She said, "Mountain Road's fine. Or just by the post office, anything."

"Is your car there?" I said.

She said her car was still in the garage, which is what I hoped — so I said "It's late now, though. Let me give you a lift home from the depot."

She said she didn't want to do that — and I promise, the way she said it, it felt like it *fell* into the bus.

I took two blocks, just to build myself up, and then I pulled over on the corner of Mountain Road. I opened the doors and then when she stood up, I tried this line I'd thought of on her.

I said, "Victoria, how about we make a deal? If you give me your number, I promise I'll get hold of you sometime."

She said she didn't want to do that, either — and then she got out the bus, and I watched her put her hood over her head, and walk up the road. She stopped walking for a second, a bit further up, and drank — then she kept on walking, up the road, into some shadows, so I couldn't see her anymore.



That angry, heavy, sad feeling she left me with, it stayed around for a month. Right there at the bottom of my stomach, like a rock. Day, night, whatever — I could feel it. I was tired all the time, and no matter what time I went to bed, or what time I woke up, I woke up every morning tireder than I was the one before — and for the first time in my life, I started to really *feel* old — I mean, in my *body*, and I started to worry, every day, about all the things that might be wrong with me by now already.

I tried, but I was too tired to start drinking again — I mean properly, I mean like making your day out of it — and when I wasn't working, I just spent my time in bed. I did things some times at night, when no matter how tired I was, I couldn't sleep — usually, I just got in the car and drove around, either to Bishop's Court to look at the houses, 'else Paarden Eiland to look at the factories, whatever my mood was, and I went to a boxing match for the first time in my life, and I went and lost money in a casino one night and then won it back on some horses a few days later — and one night I got drunk and I had sex with a woman, and the only thing I can remember about her is her name was Pearl. And that stuff was all fun, for a bit — but I felt like I could see exactly where it'd all go, in the end, and that scared me — and mostly, I tried to just keep going in my real way, I told myself even if my heart was never in it, ever again.

The day the big thing happened though, I was feeling raw — like battling to talk to people, even — and I think I was also just pissed off with the heat. That whole week, that's all the newspapers were talking about — HEAT WAVE BRINGS CITY TO ITS KNEES, things about homeless people dying, and farm animals, and stories about people getting road rage and toyi-toying about not having water. It was one of those mornings where at ten o'clock, everything looks bleached out already, like it's just a picture of the real thing, and you just *know* how it's going to be in the city at lunch-time — one of those days where if you had the easy shift, like I did, the ten to four, *you* were actually the one getting the rough end of the stick.

It was so hot they closed the schools at eleven o'clock. That's why the traffic was like it was in the first place — but you should've *seen* Main Road at lunch-time. People were crossing the road just where they liked, and there were taxis everywhere, sometimes three of them driving next to each other, all meant to be on the same side of the road, and there were lots of us, the buses — we were everywhere too, and everyone was trying to rush, and no one was driving properly.

And then — my bus was full, I wasn't even making stops — it was by the bus stop outside Balmoral, that's where I heard it happen. A bang, and then a screech and then another bang, and then a sound like I hadn't ever heard before — and straightaway, I could see everyone's brake lights go on, and I stomped on my brakes, and put on my emergencies.

This is how it must've happened. On the left, coming up Greatmore Street, past that corner just before the robot where you always see homeless guys sleeping, some guy in a dark red Golf had tried to

get into the traffic — but going the other way, towards town. The taxi that was in my lane actually stopped for him, but another guy — in a white Hilux — he hadn't stopped. That was the one thing. The other thing was the lights must've changed, and some guy in a scooter coming too fast around the bend on Roedebloem had driven straight into the other accident — and he'd gone over the front, and straight through this other lady's windshield.

After I'd put that all together, I saw what the last thing was. The guy on the scooter had actually swerved, like *into* the other crash. He'd swerved because this girl was in the road, this little girl with plaits, in a dark blue uniform with yellow on it, like the thing I have to wear — she was there, and there was a woman lying in the road on the other side of the crash. That little girl, you could see, she was so scared she couldn't move, she wasn't even screaming, not even crying.

That's when I did it. I saw a gap in the traffic coming my way from town — and I leaned hard on my hooter, and I turned off the emergency lights and just put the indicator on, and I bumped the back of a car on my way across and I nearly, nearly had a guy drive into the side of the bus, and he nearly had a guy go into the back of his car — but I did what I was trying to, I put the bus skew across the road, so no one, even if they were overtaking, they couldn't get past.

It was okay after that, because the people coming the other way could see what was going on, and they just turned left, or else stayed where they were. I didn't jump out and go pick the little girl up in my arms or anything like that — I wish I did, but I saw someone else do it just when I got out the bus. I went to the woman on the other side of the crash — she was definitely alive, but something had knocked her out, properly. When I turned around again, there were people everywhere, trying to get the dead guy out his car, and crowding round the guy who'd come off his scooter. I watched that guy die about half an hour later, when they were putting him in the ambulance — but then, he was still moaning. All I could hear was him moaning, and hooters and sirens, sounding like a long way off.

I think the whole thing was in one of the papers the next day. I remember at the time, there were some people taking photos, and I think I spoke to someone who was writing stuff down. Anyway, however she found out about it — the point is, Pettie called me, the day after it happened.

I had the day off work. When I got in in the morning, they'd sent me to go talk to somebody, she was basically a student from UCT with a questionnaire — and she'd spoken to them, and they'd told me I could be off as long as I needed to be — but two or three days would be ideal. I'd slept all day and then I went out and had something to eat, and three beers. I got home and then it was maybe five, six o'clock when Pettie called.

Obviously it was difficult in the beginning, talking to her. I didn't know what kind of mood to be in about it, or what she wanted to hear from me. She asked me how I was, and I told her about what happened there on the road, and she told me she was sorry I had to see something like that. I asked how she was, and she told me some things about her work, and how the kids were at school — all stuff I probably could've guessed, but it was still nice to hear her tell me.

And then, after we'd talked about that stuff, we went quiet for a while. Really, the line was just silent — but we didn't hang up. I picked up the phone and sat down on the floor in the kitchen with

it, with my back against the fridge. This thick sunbeam was coming through the window above the sink, and everything was a warm, deep yellow colour. I wished I had a beer.

Five minutes, maybe, we were quiet. Finally, I said “Hey, do you think I could talk to the kids?”

Pettie said, “Chloe’s gone to bed already, she wasn’t feeling well” — in this voice, like she’d spent the time we were quiet crying.

“What about Jas?” I said.

“Ja, she’s around.”

“Am I allowed?”

I heard her cover the phone, then say “Jasmine! Come here, baby.”

They talked for a bit on the other side, very softy — then Pettie said to me “She’s just going to the other phone so we can all talk together.”

I heard my daughter say Hello, and it shocked me how her voice had changed already, so much. I remembered the last time I’d heard her speak, she’d just had her teeth out — and I realised that she’d have new ones by now, she’d have her grown-up teeth — and it hurt me, that I hadn’t seen them yet.

“Hey, hello Jas,” I said. “It’s your daddy here.”

“I know that, daddy. Mommy told me.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“How’s school?”

“Fine.”

“Aren’t you hot?”

“No but it’s nice, daddy. We had no school yesterday, and today we went swimming.”

“Ja, that’s great Jas. How’s Chloe?”

“She’s sick.”

Pettie said, “Jasmine, why don’t you tell daddy about your friend?”

“No mommy,” Jasmine said.

I could hear my daughter breathing, like she was shy. It was easy for me to imagine her wrapping the telephone cord round and round her hand, something nervous like that. I didn’t push it, I just kept quiet.

And then — out of the blue — my little girl said, “Do you still have your cup, daddy?”

I didn’t know if I was laughing, or if it was closer to crying — it was just like a gate opened, and I said “Hey wow, Jas. Do you remember that? You know I put it up in the bus every day, still.”

That made her laugh. She said “Really, daddy? Why?”

“Do you remember what it says on it?”

She said, “No it was just white, daddy.”

“No-no-no,” I said. “It says something on it, for sure.”

“No. What?”

"You don't remember? It says KING OF THE ROAD on it, angel. Big. Big letters, red and yellow. KING OF THE ROAD."

She laughed again, and said "Why?"

And that's when Pettie really started crying — I mean sobbing, and I heard Jasmine say "Mommy?" — like she was scared, and I heard one of the lines hang up.

I heard Pettie crying, and then I heard her telling Jasmine, "No, mommy's fine, baby. You can go watch tv, mommy's fine."

I sat there for a long time, listening to her cry, and saying things like Don't worry, and It's okay, and telling her I'd just wait until she was ready to talk again. The kitchen was nearly dark, black shadows and blue light. I'd given up on wanting a drink, and my mind was just going between things — and I felt like I was on the verge of something, something major.

Finally — I don't know, I suppose I cracked — and I said, "Hey Pettie, do you mind if I tell you about something?"

She said, "Of course, Peter."

"But I think I might just need to talk, I mean just me — for a while, just talk. It might not all really make sense to you."

"I don't care," she said. "Just please speak. I can't now."

And I must've talked for an hour, at least — the room went dark, then I could see the streetlights, just a bit, on the window, and when a car went past the headlights would go across the walls, while I talked — this strange feeling of hearing things I'd been thinking about for months, but in real words, in my own voice. I told her all about Victoria — about seeing her in the movie, and then seeing her again and again, and what that did to me — and how strange I got for a while, how close I got to losing grip.

I said how obviously I didn't blame Victoria or anything — but also how I wasn't even upset with myself, really. How could I be? Even while it was happening, I was doing stuff I couldn't help myself doing. I told her about how much time I've been spending in bed, and about the feeling I've had — angry all the time, angry just *because* I am who I am, and I'll never be different, and because I have to be this way in this world, and it never gets better — "Because," I said, "Pettie, this world, I promise, you can say what you like about it — but in this world, people like me, we never feel like we win.

"Even like with this accident, now. You know why I did that thing with the bus?" — and I told her properly about those three things I saw — and I told her the only reason, the only reason at all was because I'd seen that guy on the scooter had swerved for that little girl, that was it. I said to her, "I'm not telling you this because I think what *I* did was important, Pettie. Or even that it made a difference. You know what, I could've killed that guy that nearly drove into me — he was in a Tazz, he might've even been decapitated, that's what they say happens sometimes with the small cars, I promise. I'm telling you because I did what I did because I'd seen that guy on the scooter'd basically killed himself, in the worst way you can think — just because he didn't want to hit that little girl. And I've thought about it, and even if it was instinct, or whatever — that's better, that's even *more* beautiful, isn't it? And I remember, even at the time, you know how you can feel things sometimes, like the moment's

fallen on you, out the sky — I *knew* my life would never be okay if that little girl got hit and died. I knew if that happened, I was dead — too.”

Pettie said, “But she didn’t die, did she?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“So there you go,” Pettie said — and I could hear in her voice she was smiling. “You’re not dead.”

“No, not yet,” I said — and this feeling rushed through me, straight through, a cleansing, burning feeling — and at that moment, it was like I remembered Pettie all over again. I remembered her being kind like that to me, always. Always just trying little things — even the times when I was drunk, I was unreachable — I remembered she’d try them, little things to get me to come back to her all the time. I remembered the once — I think back when we both still believed it was just a thing I was trying out — she’d even dropped the kids off at a friend’s and shown up at a bar I was at, smiling at me, dressed up nicely, there to drink.

It was like this whole big picture opened up — being back with Pettie and the kids, being solid again — it was beautiful, and I could see it so clearly, it felt impossible I couldn’t have it.

I said to her, “Pettie, listen. I just want to thank you for calling, hey. It’s all I needed.”

I said, “Listen, maybe, would it be okay if I called you some time? Or maybe even if we could meet? Not soon, I promise. Give me some time still — but don’t worry. When I call, I’ll be happier, Pettie. I promise, I’ll be my proper self again. I can see it — that’s where I go from here.”

GOOD NEIGHBOUR

Seeing as though I'm out of work — and I do nothing with my free time — I admit, it made sense for Dirk to speak to me about joining Good Neighbour.

Dirk used to be a policeman, and he started the neighbourhood watch thing all by himself, because “it felt right” — and Jesus, was he proud of it. He was wearing a Good Neighbour t-shirt when he came over, a very obviously home-made one.

He put it to me like this: “Me and Johnno and Bertram have the time for it, so we do it. It's a good thing to do. More people would help us also, there's good people living here. But they're busy with their jobs and they can't stay awake the whole night. So we make it our job to keep them safe. And it feels good hey. You feel good when you do it.”

And then, he got a bit of a dark look on his face, and he spoke slower, and he said “Soon they're going to *know* about us — and then they won't come around anymore.”

He looked at me like it was time for me to say something — you know, like it was time for me to commit. I just told him I'd think about it, and that he should come back the next day.

And I did think about it, I went and lay back on the couch and finished checking through the newspaper — then lay there some more, and tried hard to imagine myself getting into something like a neighbourhood watch thing.

I mean, since we've moved down here, I haven't been sleeping very well, and I don't feel very safe — I won't lie about that. It's only Richmond Hill, and it's only PE — but if you walk down the road from where our place is, there's rubbish everywhere, and weeds high as your knee growing out the pavement, and rusted cars on bricks in some of the driveways, and a guy living in a Toyota Cressida, and houses with broken windows, and houses with smoke stains on them, and houses where you hear people shouting, any time you walk past them. I swear some times at night, I think I hear gunshots — and I lie there waiting for sirens, but they never come.

It's not like any place I've lived before, I think that's the main thing. In Joburg, I've realised now, I always lived in places you'd have to be *good* to break into — but here, the whole neighbourhood just feels like the kind of place where if I was only driving through, I think I'd automatically do like my dad taught me, and lock the doors and roll the windows up, or down, whatever the case was, just so there was a little gap, and nobody could smash them. Thinking about it, I could see how a certain kind of guy would get a kick out of being a peace-keeper around here — it'd be noble and everything — but still, really, I couldn't see it being me.

And obviously, I don't really *want* to work. I mean, who does? Doing nothing's the best, as long as you can afford it. But the only way I afford it is thanks to Kath, and it's not even that I mind that — trust me, being kept is easily the best thing I've ever been. I just, lately, I just worry I'm turning into one of *those* guys,

one of those losers you remember from when you were a kid — someone's, not quite your best friend, but close — their dad, who probably drove you home from sport drunk once or twice a week, and always had shit talked about him behind his back, and whenever you saw him, gave off a vibe that was nearly godlike it was so tragic.

Like look at Kath. We moved down here because she wants to get into the shabby chic furniture thing now, and Joburg's too full of it already — but she spent a year, just before I met her, she basically spent a year in a van, driving around to every small town you can think of, weird places like Paul Roux, Philadelphia, Die Hel, Nieu Bethesda, parking the van in campsites sometimes and sleeping in it, everything — just driving around, and collecting antiques. Buying them cheap from the little shops she found, checking the newspapers, going to garage sales, and apparently the best, was auctions — especially if someone'd died, and no one was claiming their stuff. After a while she had to pack up crates and leave things in storage in Paarl and then again in Zastron, but she got it all back to Joburg in the end, and she opened a shop in Parkhurst and resold the stuff — you can imagine how marked up.

I love that story — and *that's* what I want, just a hobby or something — something to do with myself, that I can do all the time, and I like doing it, and it can just pay me enough to keep me ticking over. But it's hard to even know where to start, with something like that — and obviously, I've just done nothing. I get anxious about not earning — at one point, it actually drove me crazy, and I sold some stuff — a pair of real Spanish leather boots I never wore because I didn't want to mess them up, a guitar I never really learned to play, lots of my CDs, and some books I thought I'd keep forever. All that, and I think maybe I paid my way through a *month's* rent. And you can't — I mean *I* can't — I can't barman at my age. I even tried it again, I worked a whole shift, but it felt so shit I told myself Never, ever again — and I promise, I meant it.

So that's where I was with everything — I'd sort of got myself feeling a little guilty, so maybe I was a bit susceptible — when Dirk came round again, it couldn't've been more than an hour since he'd come round the first time.

He asked if I'd had a chance to think about anything yet. And then he said, "I promise, my friend, you won't regret this. This is real stuff."

I asked him how much I would get for it — and really, he looked at me like he had no idea what I meant.

He was just quiet, and confused, then after a while he said, "You mean, like *pay*?"

And I couldn't actually admit right then that that's what I'd meant, so I just said, "How many nights a week would I work?"

He told me "Two, three at the most" — then he asked if I had a jacket or something, that he could get his wife to sew a patch on for me.

Before I could respond, he said "And listen boy, don't worry about pay — when they *know* about us, and they stop coming round here, that's your pay."

And obviously I was thinking, Hang on, who the fuck are *they*, and the what the fuck am *I* going to do about it if they come around? — but I was still feeling weird for asking about money, and I figured I was probably going to guilt myself into doing *something* at some stage, anyway — and on top of all that, I don't think I was paying full attention to myself, when I went and fetched an old black fleece jacket I don't wear so much anymore, and gave it to Dirk.

He asked me if I had a torch, and I told him I probably had. Then he shook my hand and thanked me, and he said he'd make a new schedule and bring it to me when he brought my jacket back.

I promise, he was back in half an hour with everything. He showed me the week's schedule, and gave me a copy of the patrol map. He'd drawn my route in with a pink highlighter — but he told me I should probably memorise it. He gave me my jacket and I held it up and looked at the patch his wife had sewn on the back. It was a bright yellow circle with a black shape in the middle, three people holding hands. He gave me a list of his and Johnno's and Bertram's phone numbers, and he told me "Well done. This is real stuff, this."

My first shift was on a Wednesday, a few weeks ago — probably, no easily, in the top three worst nights of my life. I was so scared, from the second I left the house. I heard Kath lock the door behind me, and then I turned on our little verandah, and it was like a dream, the first thing I saw was this big, yellow, scary sickle moon in the sky — with little bits of cloud flying past it, like witches on broomsticks. I tried to walk the route Dirk had drawn for me, and do what seemed right, you know, shine my torch into the dark places where the streetlights don't reach, into bushes and under cars and up trees, stuff like that — but then I thought to myself, if I had an axe, or a gun or whatever, and I felt like killing someone — surely I'd *have* to pick the guy with the torch over there, on his hands and knees, looking down the storm drain.

So, for the first few hours, I just ended up sitting on a corner under the brightest light in the whole neighbourhood — with a rock in each hand, just in case. Even though it was June, I was sweating. Sometimes, I'd see the steam from someone's breath coming toward me, or I'd hear their footsteps, or maybe I'd just hear dogs barking because *they* heard something, and I'd get up and walk up and down the middle of the street so it looked like I was doing what I was supposed to — but mainly, I just sat there trying to keep myself from running home.

Around one or two in the morning, I was so cold, I sort of *had* to walk for a while — so I got the patrol map out of my pocket, and I went down a fucking terrifying street by mistake. It'd looked *fine* from the other side of the road — but it had a municipal bin in it, and this huge pile of blankets in a doorway about halfway down, probably two people, sleeping. I remember Dirk or maybe Johnno at the meeting said something about waking the sleepers up, and telling them to fuck off — but that was the last thing I was ever going to do, really, I was *grateful* they were sleeping, I even turned off the torch when I past them, just in case I woke them up.

I did find someone hiding — but it wasn't the bad kind. I went around a corner with my torch, and I saw this orange reflector vest, ducked behind a bush. He turned and looked at me, and I saw it was a car guard — and it was scary, but only because I could see *he* was so scared. I said to him, the first thing, I said "Shit, what's happening? Are they here?"

It turned out the guy, he said his name was Ralph, had run up all the way from Central, because he'd seen a couple of guys jacking a car in Havelock Street. When he'd gone up to them, quite close, he saw one of them had a gun — and he said he ran so fast and he was so scared, he couldn't remember for sure if they'd fired at him or not. I had a thermos with me, that Kath made, with a bit of coffee left in it, and I gave the guy a cup and we spoke a bit, and I even got him to walk a bit of my route with me for a while. He was Zimbabwean, only been working in PE for a week, washing dishes in the day, watching cars at night. He told me a story about his brother getting sucked under a truck in Bulawayo when they were kids, trying to hitchhike home for school holidays — and I looked that up a few days after, and apparently it does happen — because the wheels are so big and if they're really moving, like say the truck doesn't slow down, sometimes there's a pressure drop, and I guess if you're standing too close or if you're small or whatever, apparently it happens, you can get sucked right in under the wheels.

Ralph said he had to leave at some stage, probably three or half-past. I still really wanted to go home, but I knew I couldn't do that — so I just spent the rest of the night thinking about how I was going to quit.

I'd made up a big story about how I was going to start painting — wildlife paintings or something, something that I could sell — but when I ran the story by Kath the next morning, she told me I had to be honest. She's big into charity, and honesty and stuff like that, and also she said — and I know she didn't mean it like this, but it really did feel like a little blade going into my side, just to weaken me before the fight — she said that me doing the neighbourhood watch thing, was making her proud.

In the end, I went to Dirk's house, and basically just told him how scared I was the whole night — and how I never wanted to do it again.

He laughed a little, then said "Why, what happened?"

I told him "Nothing special, it's just not for me, I don't think." I didn't tell him about the sleepers, or Ralph, and obviously, I didn't tell him I only walked the route once all the way through.

He said, "Now, hang on. What'd you have with you?"

I told him I had my torch, and I told him about the rocks I picked up.

He laughed again — and then, in one movement, it was like it was happening in a movie — he put his hand in his jeans and pulled out a gun. A small, silver one.

He said, "Carry something like *this*, instead" — and then he asked me if I wanted to hold it.

I said I didn't — and I thought about the only time I'd ever held a gun in my life. It was dad's, and thank god the only way I ever got to know about it was because I found it lying at the bottom of his sock drawer when I was looking for porn. I think I was fourteen, or fifteen, but still, when I picked it up it was so much heavier than I was ready for, I dropped it — and fuck, it banged on the floor so loudly I thought it'd gone off and really, I've never wanted to even *see* a gun ever since.

Dirk shook his head a little, then said "Well, there's a reason why *they* carry guns as well, hey. But if you want something you can feel safe with, get a taser like Bertram's. His one even shoots, a bit."

I said, "A *taser*?"

And there was a big, embarrassing thing — where I really wouldn't believe that you got those things in real life, and that *I'd* be allowed to buy one. I thought it was just Dirk's way of being cruel, because the gun'd freaked me out — but he promised me, there was a guy who sold them on the corner of Stanley Street, right here in our neighbourhood.

I went and bothered Kath in her workshop about it, because I was worried it was ridiculous — *me*, actually buying a taser. She told me if it'd help me handle the whole thing better, I could put it on the credit card she gave me, the one that's linked to her account.

The guy who sells tasers is Quinton — he has a massive security shop, about twenty minutes from our house, if you're walking. It's called Defence First, or First Defence, one of the two. It's actually impressive, even if you're not into that stuff. The place has everything — I could've bought a gun from *him*, if I wanted — but there're also like sixty-metre coils of razorwire, and alarms that work with fingerprints, and burglar bars, and ninja stars and a fucking crossbow on a wall all by itself, and those targets you shoot at, with the outline of a person covered with rings, they were hanging all over the shop.

When I asked Quinton about tasers, he told me to follow him, and we went to a small shelf in the corner of the shop, near the window.

"Here's them," he said.

In the sun coming through the window — bright, winter sun — it looked like a rack of toy guns.

I said, “What’s the story with them?”

“This one,” he said — and he picked one up — “Is our best brand, it’s the one that can shoot a bit, as well as give a contact shock, and it’s the fifty model. And this one,” he said — and he picked up another one, it was a bit bigger — “Is the same, except it’s the hundred model.”

I asked him what the fifty and the hundred meant, and he said it was the volts.

I asked what fifty volts would do to a person — and he laughed, and he said, “No, sorry. It’s fifty thousand.”

That seemed like so much, it blew my mind. I couldn’t help myself, I had to ask him about the other one — you know, the hundred thousand — I said, “What the hell would that *do* to someone?”

And he got a really funny look on his face, and looked out the window for a while. I looked where he was looking, and there was nothing there, just an empty street — but in that white light coming through the window, like hospital light, I could see little muscles working around his eyes, and his jaw, and his mouth.

It was strange, because I’d almost recognised it for myself — I mean, I’d almost remembered where I’d seen that kind of look before, and what always came next — and then Quinton did it, he just gave it away. He asked, just exactly like the guy my dad saw for a while taught *him* to do it, Quinton asked if he “could share with me a painful event from his past” — I swear, those same words, exactly.

Apparently back in April, a lady, a pretty one, had come in on a Saturday morning, when the shop was full — also asking about tasers. Quinton had showed her the two models, like he’d showed them to me, and she’d said she wanted the powerful one, the hundred thousand.

So Quinton picked it up to show her how it worked — and I’m sure he showed off a little, like pretended to aim it and stuff, I would’ve, if she was pretty and I was into weapons — and then, just as he was handing it over, so she could hold it for herself, something happened.

I still don’t know if tasers even have safeties, but maybe the safety was off, I don’t know — but the thing discharged, it fucking zapped him, right on the hand.

And he told me all of it very steadily, and sort of with an encouraged smile on his face — but I could tell what it was for him. He had the same look my dad used to get, every time he told his hijack story. I saw that face thousands of times growing up, I know it, and I know that voice too — when it sounds like they’re reading what they’re telling you off a screen inside their head.

He told me how he remembers seeing the shock — he said I’ll see for myself, it’s white, like lightning, and then how he just passed out — out cold in his own shop, full of people. And then, he said, when he woke up, the shop was empty. Everyone was gone. Nobody was around, nobody had called anyone and — how’s this — he told me that he was grateful for that, because when he woke up, he had spit all down his front, and he’d pissed himself.

I’ve told this story to a few people, myself — including Kath, probably two or three times — and no one else seems to get as, I don’t know, *rocked* by it, as I did. Maybe it’s just the place I am, I mean in my head, right now — but really, it was a thing for me. There was something *graphically* fucking kak about having this guy, Quinton, you know what he looks like, he’s about thirty-five and he’s got long sandy hair, and ridiculously pale eyes, and small teeth and tight, *brown* skin — having him tell me, this was the coda to the whole thing, he said that after he’d woken up and closed the doors and turned off the lights, and settled down

a bit and everything, got himself together — he said as soon as he knew he was going to live, for sure, the first thing he did was thank god nobody'd gone through the till.

And I mean, I was still reeling from that, I couldn't say a word — when he asked me to wait there, and I saw him go off to the tills, and get something out from a drawer under the counter. Whatever it was, it was wrapped in a small towel.

He walked back over to me, and when he was still metres away, he called "Here, this is the one" — and he unwrapped the towel, and there he was, *holding* the fucking taser that'd shocked him.

I think my blood was just up at the time, I mean I know it was — but I got emotional right then, really, I think I put my hand on Quinton's arm, and I made myself look him square in the eyes, because apparently, Kath says, I'm bad at that normally.

I said to him — I was thinking about how many times he's probably done this little show since it happened, and with strangers, who I promise, I've seen, they *don't* care, and you can't blame them, there're of sad stories in the world — I said to him, "Quinton, please. I *beg* you to sell me that taser. That's the one I want."

He put up a bit of a fight in the beginning — but I promise, I even surprised myself how serious I was about it. I could hear it, in my voice — this strong, true note, the kind you sort of feel in the air — and even when he started to cry, I stayed strong, and told him I wanted it.

And in the end, I could see, obviously, he was happy to get rid of it. I put it through on the credit card, and he put it in a bag for me — and when he handed it over, he said, "And thank you, sir. Really, thank you again, very much."

I was on my way out of the shop, and then I saw — against the wall on the other side, under the window, next to a shelf full of magazines — I saw this little table set up, right in the middle of a patch of morning sun, with a kettle plugged into the wall, and some newspapers, and mugs, and sachets of coffee and sugar, and those little things of longlife milk. And it was strange, but I didn't force it or anything, I just imagined myself, sitting at the table there, with Quinton — doing crosswords most of the day, helping people when they came in, carrying stuff in from trucks sometimes, maybe, putting it out in the shop — both of us, I mean me and Quinton, in a stage of our lives where we probably wouldn't talk to each other much, through the day, but at least we'd be *doing* something, from my side, and at least there'd be *someone* around, from his.

I walked back to the counter, and I looked Quinton in the eyes again, and I just didn't hold back — I told him about getting retrenched, and about moving here, and how I've been looking, every day, but there's just nothing I want to do with myself — and how I've been living off my girlfriend for so long, and how much I'm worrying at the moment, about what that says about my calibre.

I told him about Good Neighbour, and how there couldn't be anyone worse in the world doing it — about how scared I get, and how scared I've been my whole life because of my dad and his stories and his secret gun. I even *said* to him — maybe it was confusing, the way it happened, I'm not sure — "Quinton, I feel like you and me, we feel like we're losing, hey? Is that right? I'm sorry to say it, but I think I'm right.

"But listen man, I think, if you let me work here, even just part-time, that's fine — I think it'll be better. For both of us, I mean. I just had the idea, but I think it's good."

I meant everything I said there — but look, I mean, this is the guy who woke up like he did, in that shop, with everyone gone — and if I'm honest, go see for yourself, he looks like he's got quite a past on him, too. So I don't, I really don't hold onto it, that all he did was keep quiet, for a minute or more, then when I said

“Quinton?” just told me if I was worried about break-ins at my place, I should buy a BEWARE OF THE DOG sign — because even if I didn’t have a dog, it’d help, anyway.

And I was sad, sure, but all of a sudden, there was also something really, unbearably funny about it all, I mean even the stuff I’d said to him — and I actually laughed, then just smiled at him, and took it well — and I said “Thanks again for selling me this one,” and I walked out the shop.

What I did — on my way home from the shop, on a quiet street — and it wasn’t a good mood thing, it was serious, I took the taser out the shopping bag, took it out the holster it came with, and I threw it down a storm drain.

I’ve kept the holster, and I make a big show of tucking my jacket over it when I leave the house at night for my shifts — I’m patrolling three, sometimes four nights a week now, because Bertram’s quit — I even make sure Kath sees me double-checking that it’s there on my hip before I say goodbye and kiss her, just so she thinks I’m armed and ready.

How I do it now, is I walk the whole route in about twenty minutes flat, so fast that sometimes I get a stitch — shining my torch around me without even really looking where the beam’s going, and I sing to myself, loudly, to make sure if anyone’s around, they’ll hear me coming, and I won’t have to do anything first. I do that, and then I find a driveway where I can hide and I stay there for about an hour, praying I don’t hear anything that sounds like I need to be there. Then I do the route again, and I keep going like that, all night, until I hear birds.

That’s when I let myself run home.

FISHING TRIP

The last time Glen saw his son, he screamed at him through a closed car window. He beat on the window as the car pulled away. He threw one shoe at the back windshield, and he took the other one off — but his son spun the tyres, and then they were gone.

It was nearly ten years since they'd left, and lately, Glen'd been dreaming about it again. Two months ago, he'd gone back to drinking in the morning — and soon after, like clockwork, the nightmares'd come back. Glen too drunk to stay awake, and having to go through it all again, night after night, just like it happened. Sometimes even worse, because in the dream something bent would happen — like his son would have red eyes, or his wife's hair'd be snakes.

The nightmares were so bad, he called them his freakshows, and years ago, a few months after they started the first time — after they began to take hold of him in those first few months on his own, throwing shadows on his mind even when he was awake, in the daytime — he'd panicked and he'd gone to speak to someone about them, no one fancy, just someone from Rhodes who normally saw students. She was sweet and everything to Glen, and he liked talking to her — but he could tell, she was worried about him. She cried while they were talking. Then she told him that he *had* to stop drinking for a while — because she was going to give him some pills to stop the nightmares that'd unhinge him, if he mixed.

Glen did well for a while — he stayed sober, while his life entered a sad, gentle, sort of autumnal period, where taking a moral stock of himself seemed a natural, and brave thing to be doing. He got nearly halfway through the pills, and the freakshows stopped, and then he started to have normal dreams again, and he started being able to eat like he had before the wheels'd come off. But then, he felt the pull — badly, and then worse and worse — and he decided to compromise with himself. He made himself rules about his drinking, and for nine years, he stuck to them, a hundred percent — until one morning in June, the day after he'd spent a night with a woman who'd truly expected to be paid after they were finished. In his kitchen that morning, at 9 o'clock, Glen drank a glass of whiskey that he kept filling for about a week — and the freakshows came back, and soon then they had him up every morning just desperate to drink.

He stopped opening the shop and he stopped answering his phone and his door. Spending whole afternoons in the bath, drinking whiskey with ice. Talking to himself. And then every evening, if he could get himself there, going to his bar — the place right above the bottlestore on New Street, round

the corner from where he lived. The owner of the place, Denis, was basically the only person Glen talked to anymore — and he loved it there, it was always better than being at home. It wasn't one of those places where it didn't matter what you did, no one cared — it was better than that — no one even *looked*, they were too busy with their drinks.

One night in August — Glen'd been hard at it, had got very close to passing out in front of the tv, before he forced himself out the house — when he walked into the bar, he saw Denis there behind the till, except Denis didn't wave like usual, he just started shaking his head. And then when Glen went to the counter, Denis didn't say Hello, or anything — all he did was point up at a sign hanging behind the optics.

"Lots of whiskey, little ice," Glen said.

Denis kept pointing at the sign.

"What, are you closed? Just a quick one. Promise you."

Denis said, "What does it say there? It says no shoes no service, Glen. I'm sorry."

"Oh come on, Den. I'm in here barefoot sometimes."

"Fuck, Glen. That's in summer. Sometimes I let it slide when you're in shorts as well. When you're sweating like you do. But for fuck's sake, *look* at you — you've got pants and socks on. You look crazy."

"Jesus Den, relax," Glen said. "Just give me a drink. Look, I've been out of it a bit, but just relax man. Please."

Denis went to the bottle of MacQueen's that he kept for Glen and filled Glen's cup — a stainless steel thing that took about four shots, that he got free with a bottle of Old Brown Sherry years ago. Like always, Denis poured the whiskey over three blocks of ice in a beer glass — and charged Glen ten bucks for it, and wouldn't take a tip.

They were quiet while Glen had his first sips. The only other guy that was in the bar finished his beer, came and asked for another one to take away, and then left. When he was gone, Glen said "Hey Den, how about some Creedence?"

"No, Glen. Not tonight, please. I've got a headache."

"One song."

"Okay," Denis said. "But choose nicely. One song."

They listened to 'Who'll Stop the Rain' — with Glen beating time on the bar with his hands. When it was finished, he looked at Denis and said, "One more time."

"No, I said one."

"It's still one song — it's just twice. Please, man."

They listened to it again, and straight after it finished, Denis turned off the stereo and unplugged it from the wall. Glen laughed and finished his drink. He spun his finger in a circle above the empty glass and said, "Refuel."

"Hey, before I do that," Denis said. "How've things been, Glen?"

"Ag, same old."

"Because people are saying some pretty nuts things about you. You know, around town."

Glen said, "Well — I've been bending it a little, maybe."

"But, like, in a *normal* way?"

"Fuck, Den. What's that even mean? Everyone's got a different normal."

"You know what I'm talking about, Glen. Are you flipping out again? My sister said she saw you outside your shop in your dressing gown — shouting down the street, at nothing."

"Ja, how is Kirsten? Has she stopped yet with the —" Glen said, and made like he was smoking a joint.

Denis took a deep breath, and rubbed his eyes. "Now look, Glen. My friend. Hey? You are my friend."

"You're the only person I talk to, Den."

"Ja so, exactly. I'm your friend. So that's where this is all coming from here, please." Denis took another deep breath. "Okay, Glen, I'll give you another cup, on the house, even — if you promise you won't get angry if I tell you something."

"No ice, thanks Den," Glen said. "And you can just put it in this glass. Don't make a clean one dirty just for me."

Denis poured from the bottle into the cup, and then from the cup into the glass in front of Glen. Then he looked at him, and said "Are you ready?"

"Hit me," Glen said.

"Okay, so Glen, when Kirsten told me she thought you might be having spells again, I started thinking about how to help. But proper help, you know? None of this put a plaster on it for a while kak — I want to help you *fix* it."

Glen moaned and said, "No more pills, Denis."

"I know, I know. Exactly. Hear what I'm saying," Denis said. "What I did was... I called your wife, and I called your son. And now listen, I'll be honest with you, Lisa's a dead-end — *never* call her, Glen. Straight. She just doesn't want to hear it — but Jason, listen Glen, Jason says you should give him a call sometime, soon. Really, he said that. I've got his number for you and everything. Hey? How's that?"

Glen sighed, and then drank his whole glass down in one sip. He spent some time with his eyes closed and his head bowed, rubbing his hand over and over his moustache. Denis could see sweat leak out of his baldspot. When Glen raised his face, his eyes were teary, but he was smiling. "Jeez, Den. You've worked a miracle for me here, brother."

"Really?"

"The last time I saw my son, I think I might've called him a queer cunt — and I think I might've even meant it. I don't deserve to talk to him again."

"Well," Denis said. "The past is past, hey Glen?"

"Ja, I suppose. Alright," Glen said. He stood up. Denis started turning off lights. "I'll call him tomorrow," Glen said. "Put his number in my pocket, Den. Or write it on my hand."

"I've already got it downstairs on a little note for you," Denis said. "Have you eaten anything tonight? When we go down, you can take some chips. Biltong, whatever. Staff account."

"Do you still have those pork crackling things?"

"Think so."

"Ja, that's the ticket," Glen said. The last light went off. Glen let Denis take his arm, and lead him out the bar.



Glen woke from a freakshow, sweating — and nearly ran to the kitchen, and put some whiskey in a glass before he even remembered about the night before, and about Jason and everything. He had the glass in his hand when he remembered — he saw a big note he'd written to himself on the inside of his forearm, WORK IN THE MORNING!!! Glen saw the note, and he knew everything it meant — but he still nearly gulped the whiskey, and it took a lot for him to throw it down the sink. He watched it go down the drain, and then he lay down on the kitchen floor, and just shook for a while. When he got himself up, he put the kettle on and ran a bath. In the time it took him to bath and change into his work clothes, he drank three cups of strong coffee, filter coffee that he just brewed in the bottom of his mug.

Being at work felt surreal to him, and Glen had the shakes all morning. No one came in and no one called, except Denis, with Jason's number. He put off calling his son till the afternoon — and even then he'd hung up after one or two rings, and then dodged the call when it came back from the other side. It was after four when he pulled the door down on the front of his shop and made himself some more coffee, spiked with about three shots from the bottle of First Watch he kept in the filing cabinet behind the desk.

At 4.30 he called again. Jason answered quickly, two rings at the most — saying "Glen, is that you?"

"Hey son," Glen said.

"Ja, jeez. How's it going?"

Glen choked up, and tried to say "Fine" — but sobbed instead, and then cried for a while, in that breathless way like children do.

Jason didn't say anything until Glen stopped. Then he said, "Come dad, it's okay."

"I'm sorry, boy."

"I know, dad," Jason said. "It's fine. Really. Listen, I want to come down there to you."

"Really?"

"Ja, really."

"Why?"

"So fuck, what now, you don't want me to come?"

"No no no no no, boy. Please. I'm just so happy you said that," Glen said. And then he started lying. From a place of impossible sweetness, Glen just spoke for three full minutes about things he wished were true about himself — about the place he lived and how business was going, and how long he'd been sober, and how he had friends now, and how there'd been women in and out of his life but he'd learned about himself that he was actually a lone wolf, and he liked it like that.

"That's so great, dad," Jason said. "I can't wait to see you. The only thing though is I'm tight on cash a bit, so if I come down there you might need to sponsor me."

"Where're you coming from?"

"Dispatch."

"Dispatch? Not Durban anymore?"

"No, just mom's still there."

"Do you have a car?" Glen asked.

"Ja, I'll drive down tomorrow. That's easy."

"Well, boy," Glen said. "You know I'm not a boaster, but I'm doing pretty well for myself down here."

They said goodbye to each other soon after that. The first thing Glen did when he hung up the phone was pick up the bottle of First Watch and go over to the sink in the corner of the shop. He had one, long sip, and then he poured out the rest.

He called Denis, and asked him to tell Kirsten to get hold of him at the shop right away. She called just after five. Glen asked her to go to At Home in the morning, and buy as much stuff for a thousand bucks as she could to make his place look nice — and then to come over after lunch to help him install it. He told her there was two hundred bucks in that for her. "Just tell them to send the bill down to the shop," he said. "And make sure you come *after* lunch, in the morning I have to clean."

After speaking to Kirsten, Glen called Jason back, and told him that he'd checked his diary, and that Jason should aim to get into town in the late afternoon. Glen gave directions, basing them on a Wimpy he knew his son'd remember. They said goodbye again, and then Glen turned off all the lights in the shop and went upstairs.

The bottle was there on the kitchen table, the first thing he saw when he got inside. Glen tried to keep his back to it while he cooked some eggs — but in the end, he found himself holding the bottle, tilting it in the light, trying to guess how many shots were left. He ate his eggs, then washed his plate and the frying pan. He went through to the bedroom, and just sat for a while on the bed.

He sat there for twenty minutes, basically just playing with his hands — before he went back through to the kitchen, and picked up the bottle. "Just a goodbye kiss," he said — and drank the rest of it in one go, lots of it spilling on his shirt. He went back to the bedroom and took off his clothes and put on a clean shirt, then turned off all the lights and got into bed. It wasn't even dark yet outside. He put a pillow over his head and tried to force himself asleep.



The cleaning'd gone alright and even seeing Kirsten, *sober*, hadn't been that bad — but then Jason was late, and the waiting nearly killed Glen. Every car he heard in the road from about four o'clock got his hopes up — but by seven, he'd stopped even getting up to check.

Sunset was the worst, that was normally when he allowed himself to start drinking every day — and he battled so much, while he watched the light on the lace curtains Kirsten'd hung in the lounge fade from gold, that the hole inside him seemed to burn, and get deeper, and wider and wider — until he went out and bought a pack of cigarettes, the first one in about twenty years. When he got home, he chain-smoked and drank coffee.

Glen let it get very dark inside, before he got up and lit some candles and turned on a lamp that had a new shade — dark red cloth, with shapes cut out of it and then backed with turquoise paper, birds and suns and stars that shone out a few millimetres with the light, like projections. Everything Kirsten had put in his lounge seemed to jump out at him then — the new throws for the couches, the gold cushions, the black-and-white print of a stone bridge she'd put up right next to the tv. Seeing all that strange stuff, in *his* house, surged through Glen with a feeling like he wanted to tear off his own skin. He remembered about a halfjack that might've been in a pair of pants in his cupboard, and he was about to go look for it, or else just go buy a fresh one — when he heard hooting in the road. He went to the window in the kitchen to check, and the car outside flashed its brights at him.

From the moment he saw Jason, Glen worried.

His son had never been as thin, not even as a toddler — and he was very pale, and it looked like he was covered in fleabites. He wore baggy black clothes and a black cap. He had his mother's hair, for sure, and it was long at the back — like a straw thatch, that hung down to about his shoulders. His eyes were dull, and they never stayed still — and he had a sparse, scraggly moustache that grew crooked across his lip, and made him look like he was sneering all the time.

"How was the drive, hey boy?" Glen said, when they got inside.

"Fine. I don't really remember it," Jason said, then laughed.

"Are you hungry?"

Jason said, "As a dog, I'll tell you." He kept his cap on, even when they were inside, sitting down.

Glen ordered them pizza, and they smoked from the box of cigarettes Glen'd bought while they waited for it. Glen felt like he'd never needed a drink so much in his life, it was so bad he felt his hearing tunnel — and Jason, Glen didn't know what he was, but he was bombed out, and it didn't seem like it was booze. Conversation between them was slow and full of long, weird silences. They ended up not speaking much after food was finished, and going to bed early.

Glen was worried about being able to fall asleep — he could hear his son moving on the couch in the next room, and there was some noise coming in from the bars on New Street, plus all he could see behind his closed eyes was the bottle that might've been in his cupboard — but in the end, he was tired

enough to pass out. When he woke, it was still dark in the room, and the first thing he did was go to the window to check how long until dawn. The sky was still black, but the rim of the valley'd gone teal. As quietly as he could, he went through and had a bath. Then he went into the kitchen and started getting things ready for breakfast.



That day went no better with Jason.

Glen woke him up when he'd nearly finished making breakfast. He'd opened the curtains, and then just as he touched Jason, to shake him a bit — Jason jerked awake, then blinked like crazy, and said "Jesus, what's the time? It can't be morning yet."

"Ja, it's early — but it's alright. Want some cowboy coffee?"

"What's that? Fuck, can't I just sleep?"

"No, there's breakfast just now, as well. It's just coffee, but you mustn't drink the last few sips because the granules stay in the cup."

"Can't I eat later? This is ridiculous."

"Ja, I didn't time it very well. But here it is," Glen said. "I'll make coffee. Come to the kitchen."

While they ate, Glen told his son he'd booked the day off work so they could spend some time together. "What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I don't know. Nothing much," Jason said.

"There's nice things, easy things we can do though, boy. Do you still like the sea?"

"No, not really."

"Okay. Why don't we go for a game drive?"

"Why'd we do that?"

"Animals, man," Glen said. "They're right here. Like forty kays or something."

"Ag," Jason said.

They ended up just sitting around in Glen's place watching tv the whole day, whatever came on. They took the print of the bridge Kirsten'd hung down, because it was putting them off the screen. All of it was a grind — and it hurt Glen to admit it to himself, but he sensed that Jason was bitter to his core, and shifty, and that he never gave a straight answer to anything. Glen tried, but he couldn't find out how long his son'd been in Dispatch — or why he'd even been there at all.

Just around sunset, Jason turned on his phone for the first time — and almost right away, a call came through. He stood up and went into the bathroom to answer it. Glen heard the door lock behind him — and then he heard a short blast of real, proper shouting. When Jason came out he was scratching at himself, and his eyes were flying around.

"Fucking mom," he said.

"What's up?"

"No, nothing."

"Are you sure? Is she okay?" Glen asked — in a stern way, not so much because he really cared, but because he was testing something.

"She's fucking fine, Glen. She can live without her car. Can I shower?"

"Of course. You're doing me proud, boy. This is the longest you've been off the couch since you've been here," Glen said.

When Jason came out the bathroom, Glen saw he'd dressed in the same clothes. "What's that over there for?" Glen asked, pointing at a sports bag near the couch.

"It's my stuff."

"Don't you think you should use some?"

"Hey, come on," Jason said. "I don't need shit from *you*. Surely."

Glen was quiet, and spent some time just looking at the bag. He remembered it from when Jason was at school. It used to be blue, and it used to have a badge on it — but now it was a sick purple colour, like also used to happen with his rugby jerseys. There was just silence, until Jason said "Hey, to be honest, dad, I'm dying in here. Can I have some money, I'd really like to go out for a bit, just by myself" — and that was a hard thing to do, Glen giving his son what was left in his wallet and his housekeys, and telling him he wasn't going anywhere, so just to lock him in.

As soon as Jason left, Glen had another bath and then ate a sandwich, then went straight to bed. He lay there with the lights off for hours, far away from sleep — but knowing that if he got out of the bed, if he put one foot out of the bed, he was going to try find a way to drink. Lying there thinking about the bottle that might've been in the cupboard, and thinking about all the places in the kitchen there might've been something, and then the car, and then the shop, and how easy it'd be to call Denis and get him to come pass him something through the window downstairs...

And then — it happened piece by piece, nearly like dream — Glen felt himself being led back through a memory from years before. Maybe Jason was ten at the time, or twelve. No older than that. It was at a time when Glen was in a routine — he *saw* it again, where before he went to bed with his wife, he'd drink two litres of water on the sly, just so he'd have to get up in the middle of the night to piss it out. Lisa slept like the dead, and over time, Glen got so good at slipping out of bed that she never noticed — and for about three hours, every morning, until he could see some light on the edge of the curtains, before he'd brush his teeth and wash his face and go back to bed, and wait for the alarm to go off at eight — he'd sit at a card table in the lounge, and drink his whiskey out of a coffee mug.

One of those mornings, it was winter and still very dark, but he was nearly finished the last mug he was going to have — Glen heard his son's clock radio go off. He knew it meant he'd forgotten something, but because he couldn't remember what it was he just went into the kitchen and dumped the mug in the sink, then brushed his teeth and washed his face and waited in the hallway. Minutes later, his son came out of his room — dressed in his sports clothes, with his bag over his shoulder.

Driving his son to school was nearly impossible. It took Glen a full five minutes to reverse out the driveway — and then going down Somerset Street, he just didn't see a donkey in the road, and missed

it by centimetres. He only realised he hadn't had his lights on the whole way when they got there — and when he stopped the car, he could see, Jason was close to crying. His son got out the car, but before he closed the door, he looked at Glen and said "Dad, are you okay? What's wrong with you this morning?"

And that was the first time in Glen's life — that moment, with Jason — Glen remembered, that was the first time he actually *felt* like what he was doing wasn't okay anymore. Like it was *obvious* he should be doing better with himself. He said to Jason, "Nothing's wrong, boy. I'm just tired" — and he sat in the car and watched his son get on the bus, which was nearly full and already idling, and he stayed sitting there, long after the bus'd driven away. Just sitting there, looking out at the sun on the sides of the valley — and feeling, right then, he remembered — really *believing*, that that was the bottom of it all, and he'd never be worse.



Glen could tell, Jason didn't think much of the Grahamstown Wheel Alignment Plaza. Glen'd woken up that morning strangely full of tolerance for himself, and optimism — and he'd really wanted to show Jason his shop, to *show* his son how it's been, how he's kept himself these years. They were downstairs before nine o'clock, Glen showing Jason what the sign looked like when you plugged the neon in, and all the computers he had in there, and all the photos on the notice boards, and the Pirelli calendar with the naked women from a few years back that he kept up on the wall. That morning, Glen felt proud of those things, he was pointing them out like features of his life — but his son's face'd been crushing. That sneer was plastered there, but his eyes had been mocking, as well — and he'd said a few things in a way that anybody could tell was sarcastic. There came a point, as Glen was looking over his son's shoulder at some photos he'd stuck on the door that lead to the urinal he shared with the tyre fitment place next door, where even *he* began to feel like no matter what he said about them, they were just photos of himself in overalls, with tools in his hand and his arm around someone from town — and *who'd* fucking care, really, anyway?

They sat together listening to the radio for most of the morning. At about eleven, the phone rang. When Glen answered, he heard Denis's voice, saying "Listen, it's me. Just be cool, I'm going to come in later. Make sure Jason's there. Okay, say it's the wrong number now — cheers."

Glen just hung up the phone, without saying anything. When Jason looked at him about it, he said "Fucking banks, they piss me off."

Just before lunch, Denis brought his car in. He didn't just park it outside, he drove it right in and onto the bed. He climbed out his car — and just like he was anybody else — he introduced himself very quickly to Glen and Jason as Alan.

The whole time it took, Denis was ridiculously polite — and the way he kept asking questions about what Glen was doing, and what the computers were saying, made it seem, Glen thought, like

any idiot could tell what was going on. Glen worked quickly, and finished in about fifteen minutes. When he was done, he told Denis “No charge.”

“No, come on sir,” Denis said. “That was amazing.”

“Your cam was dead-on, and the toe was off by point-two. You could’ve hit a stone that fixed it quicker than me.”

Denis laughed and said, “Jeez, and you’re funny. Please let me give you something.”

“Okay, it’s a hundred and twenty,” Glen said.

Denis gave him the money, and Glen took his wallet out of his pocket and put the notes straight inside. “Do you need a receipt?” he said. “I’ve stopped worrying so much about books, myself.”

“No, that’s fine,” Denis said. And then, in a way that let Glen know that the whole point of his visit was about to happen — he pointed up at a shelf behind the desk, and said, “Is that a *reel* up there?”

And from there, it actually went quite smoothly, Denis getting Glen to show the photos he kept in the filing cabinet — all in frames, all of him standing next to fish he’d caught, the fish strung up in a way that made them look about as tall as Glen, Glen smiling in every photograph. He couldn’t believe it, but the photos seemed to do something to Jason. “Hey dad, I didn’t know you fished,” he said.

“Ja, I started years ago. One summer, I was bored.”

“How often do you go?” Jason asked — and right then, Denis said goodbye, and thanked Glen a few more times, then got into his car and reversed off the bed and drove away.

“Jeez, I don’t know,” Glen said. “I go a lot, and then I don’t go for a while.”

“Where do you go?”

“Transkei, mostly. Shit, do you want to go? It’s winter — we could do some game fishing, maybe.”

“Fuck, sure,” Jason said. “For me, it’s a free holiday in the Transkei.” He said that, but a look went across his face as soon as it came out — Glen thought, almost like he wished he hadn’t said it. He kept talking. “No, I mean it’ll be nice, dad — sorry. And I’m sorry if I’ve been a bit funny since I’ve been here, a bit grumpy, or whatever. It’s just hard, with everything, you know?”

“Ag son, we’re all just the evidence of our pasts, right? I heard that once, in a song, I think.”

“What’s it mean?”

“I don’t know — but *I* mean it’s not your fault, so don’t say sorry,” Glen said. They hugged after that, for the first time since Jason’d arrived.

That evening, Jason wanted to go out again. Glen gave him the money from Denis, but told him he still needed to go get some stuff for the trip — so he’d just leave the door to the shop unlocked, and the keys to the house in the filing cabinet behind the desk.

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I won’t be late.”

“Hey boy, whatever. You know what they say — if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans for tomorrow.”

It was dark when Glen went out himself. As he walked along New Street, there was a fine, cold mist blowing down on him, and the streetlamps looked liquid, and oak leaves were spinning from the trees into the wide gutters — and Glen knew, in his bones, that it'd been a good day — and that he was just going to let that feeling take him wherever it wanted. He stopped at an ATM and then at the Pick N Pay, and bought the things they needed for the trip. Then — because he knew he would've felt too bad to buy it from Denis's place — he walked all the way up to Beaufort Street in the cold, pretty rain, and bought a takeaway halfjack from the shebeen opposite Shoprite.



The drive to Coffee Bay was seven hours that felt like twenty. All the roads'd got worse, and there was a drought going on right up and down the Eastern Cape that made it tough to enjoy looking out the window — plus Glen was nursing a secret hangover and on top of it all, Jason was sprawled in the backseat the whole way, smelling like stale beer and bar smoke. Still in his black clothes, with the cap.

While he drove the straight, easy part either side of Komga, Glen had a daydream about him and Jason fishing. In the dream his son was good at it, patient and strong, and together they fought a steenbras for a full hour before they got it out the water. When they put it on the scale it was sixty kilograms, and it shone like treated copper — and people they didn't even know were lining up to take photos of them holding it. And then when it was all finished, they went back to their room and shared some of a bottle together — they didn't even need to finish it, before they went to bed, both of them talking and laughing in the dark about how good it felt to get the fish onto the reef. And then, in the dream, falling asleep, and dreaming about the fish again.

It'd felt nice, to imagine that — but thinking about how unlikely it was, and then all the goats in the road, from the second they crossed the Kei, and the pot holes, and the way the taxis were driving — ground Glen down again, and it was late in the afternoon, and he was feeling tired and angry, when they got to the backpackers and got the keys for one of the bungalows.

They unpacked the car and they took the stuff inside, and then Glen had a shower. He changed in the bathroom and when he got out, he said to Jason, "Hey boy, why don't you grab a shower and change your clothes, then we'll go find something to eat."

"No, I'm fine hey. Let's just go."

"No," Glen said. "You're not, boy. I'm sorry. You stink. We're not leaving until you shower and change your clothes."

"Well, I *am* leaving," Jason said, and started to get off his bed.

"Hey, sit down," Glen said. "Grow up, man. Hygiene is a fucking *small* thing. You have to get that stuff right — please boy, at least."

Jason took a long time to say anything — and then he just said "Fuck off, Glen" — before he walked out of the bungalow.

Glen went to the door and shouted, “Ja, where’re you going now? Where’re you going to go, you fucking *bum!*” — and Jason’d already walked out past where the car was parked, but he turned around — and still walking backwards, he pulled some notes out of his pocket, and shook them in the air.

It was a hard thing to feel, but Glen knew, right there, in the moment, that he didn’t even *want* to chase him — he just wanted to go inside, and check his wallet to see if Jason’d left him with anything. He did that, and then he went out the bungalow, straight up to the bar.

Even though Glen didn’t recognise the bartender, the guy greeted him by his name, and said “Double Bells, little bit of ice?” — as soon as Glen sat down.

Glen said, “Uh-uh, triple, and there’s no time for ice” — and he drank it quickly, when it came.

He ended up being at the bar until after midnight. The first few drinks made him feel gentle — and he just sat there, thinking sad, clear thoughts — wishing he was at home, or at Denis’s place, instead. After a while, though, maybe five on an empty stomach, he got the dizzies, so he ordered a hamburger, and ate it at the bar. Eating made him feel like he could keep drinking forever, and he started ordering them in beer glasses, topped up with water — and he started talking to people who came to get drinks, having fun with them, and a pretty German woman came in, and he had a few shots with her along the way and then later, the bartender finally put on some Creedence — and Glen began to feel it, this great calm welling up inside. He felt like he was floating, so far away, it didn’t matter anymore what he did — and he felt like he’d found it, right then — the way he *always* wanted to feel. He had one more drink, and then just when everything started to shimmer and blur, he got sleepy — and walked himself back to the bungalow.

It took him a while to take off his clothes and find his toothbrush and everything, and then he turned off all the lights, and got into bed. He stared up the ceiling, which was just boards of shutterply laid right across the roofbeams — and breathed, deep breaths, listening to the wind above the pull of the ocean. Moonlight came in through the windows, and everything in the bungalow was glowing. Glen was nearly asleep, when he heard his cellphone go off.

He saw it flashing in the dark, the call showing up as an 043 number — and somehow, he just *knew* it was going to be Jason. He answered it quickly.

“Dad, hey, can you hear me?” Jason said, all at once.

“What’s wrong?” Glen said.

“You need to come get me dad, I’m in the copshop, in East London.”

“In East London? What did you do?”

“Fuck dad, it doesn’t matter,” Jason said. “Nothing, okay? Please. It’s a kak cell, dad — please.”

“What’s the bail?”

“I think it’s eight-fifty.”

“That’s not nothing, boy. What did you do?”

Jason made a noise like he was in pain — then just said “Come on, dad, please. Please just come get me. If you don’t get me by the morning, I stay for the weekend.”

“I don’t have that much anymore. You know that.”

"You can write a cheque, I saw your book in the car."

"But," Glen said — and then a sob came up from his gut like a retch, and he moaned at Jason — "I'm *drunk*, boy. I'm fucking *drunk*, I'm sorry. I'm useless to you now."

"No, you're not dad — just come anyway," Jason said. Then he spoke softly, "Just don't park outside the station. But come, please, I need you, just come anyway."

Glen took off his t-shirt, and used it to mop the sweat that'd come out on his head. He stared up at the ceiling again. He saw the shadow of a tree moving like a giant spider, and he got a cold feeling in his chest — and he said "No, fuck, I could kill someone on the way. I'll just call someone. There's people you can call, for stuff like this."

"But that's perfect," Jason said. "That's absolutely perfect — that's the same thing."

"No, boy," Glen said — and in his heart, he felt the weight of what he meant. "It's not the same thing. It's really not."

University of Cape Town

I AM WEARY, LET ME REST

I'm busy doing this sort of tricky fox-chase Chicago-style thing on the harmonica when I see her, and I know it's her, because there's only one of them in the world who's got hair like that — and thank god my hands keep steady on the guitar because my breath leaves me, and my beard catches in the harmonica holder, and the solo just generally goes to shit.

It's in the middle of a Stones cover I've been playing for years, so I keep going, even though I'm far away from it now.

I'm just strumming the verse part with some muting, and I realise it's going to start getting boring if I don't sing soon — so I go do the next verse, but while I'm singing I check how far through the setlist I am. I see I only have one more written down for before the break, so I sing the chorus, twice, and I leave out trying to get the audience to sing it with me, and then I just do two measures of cheap harp, and end with a cheap turnaround.

Then I tell them "Thanks, I'll be back in fifteen minutes" — and I switch off my mics, and I get up and walk straight off stage, with my guitar still in my hand, and my harmonica still around my mouth.

There's nothing like a backstage area at the sportsclub where I'm playing.

It's just this big open room with a low ceiling and bare walls, and tables and chairs spread around. I check, and all the seats are taken — and I don't smoke anymore, so I can't even go outside without looking strange.

I head to the bar and when I'm nearly there, and I swear I haven't taken my eyes off my feet yet, I remember I'm still carrying my guitar and wearing my harmonica. I turn around and go to the dark space next to the stage where I've left my cases, and I put Loretta away and fold up the harmonica holder.

For a while, I just stay kneeling next to my guitar case — pretending like I'm doing something.

I realise that if she'd been watching me, it would be weird for me not to go to the bar rightaway now. I think about this, and I realise there's no ways I'm ready for it — so I tune my B-string down and down and down and take it off, quickly, before anyone sees me doing it.

Then I take Loretta and a spare string and my small pliers up on stage with me — and I start fixing her, slowly.

Loretta's a Depression-era Gibson L2 I found in an antique store in Kalk Bay for R3000 because they were idiots that sold it to me, and I hate restringing her because her tuning posts are rusty and the pegs creak when you turn them — and I sort of remember this while I'm busy, and what I'm doing seems so ridiculous to me now, that it's almost like it's happening to somebody else. I actually laugh out loud, and then I just breathe deeply — and I tell myself that everything will be fine, so long as I get the string back on and play through the set.

I tell myself that's how a real musician'd do it.

I want a drink, but I'm not going to get one myself, and I'm scared to do my usual and announce it, and just wait for someone to bring me one — a gay dude, or a musician, sometimes a girl, but she'll be too young for me to feel good about it — I don't want to do that because of what Holly might think.

And then I look up — and I see Neil at the end of the stage, and I see he's been trying to get my attention. The record company hooked me up with Neil six or seven years ago — basically, he used to be a roadie in the 70s, he's still got long hair and he still wears tie-dye, but he doesn't do acid anymore, and he's actually quite together all things considered. He's sort of like my manager, except he spends most of his time smoking pot, and drawing these beautiful concert posters for venues I'll never get to play at — overseas places like the Ryman, and St. James' Church.

Neil looks worried.

I tell him to come over, and he says "Shit man, that's Holly isn't it? She's here. Are you freaking out?"

I say, "Jesus, chill Neil. I'm trying to be cool."

"Sorry," he says. "What a fucking trip though. Wow. She *is* beautiful, hey. Shit."

I go, "*Neil*."

And he says "Sorry. So you had no idea. Wow. Shit. Can you finish? Do you want me to say you're sick or something?"

"No, just get me a drink," I tell him.

He takes his wallet out his pocket and sort of looks into it sceptically, then asks me what I want.

I tell him "Don't be pathetic. I don't care what they said, I'm drinking for free tonight. I want Jameson's. Three shots, and lots of ice, and if they bitch, tell them — look at me, Neil — tell them I promise I'll play *fucking* nice."

He goes off and I pull the new string through the peg and I twist it round on itself and bend it back over, then use the creaky tuner to tighten it up. I tune it about an octave low, then use the pliers to cut the string, so it looks neat at the post.

I'm nearly done now, and I don't know what to do — so I just sit there with Loretta in my lap, doing some runs on the new string so maybe it won't buzz, when I start. I keep my eyes down.

Neil brings me my whiskey — it comes in a draught glass full of ice — and I see he's got one too, and he's smiling like a child, so I know he didn't pay for them.

"Hey, nice" he says when he gives me the drink, and he makes me cheers him.

Then he asks me what I'm going to do about Holly, if I'm going to speak to her — and I tell him “No, not tonight. Look at me. I look like I'm homeless. In fact, go get the money *now*, so we can fuck off as soon as I'm done.”

And that's when I realise there's no ways I'm going to be able to do the encore tonight.

I tell Neil “In fact, when you hear me start the last one on the resonator, go get the car and bring it to the ramp. And just take Evangeline off now, please. I don't need her again.”

He starts to me of course I'm going to need the banjo for later, but I don't let him finish. I say “No, I'm not doing it tonight. Just take her off, please. Now. Go put her in the car.”

He puts his drink down, and takes Evangeline off stage, and puts her in her case.

Then he comes back to get his drink and the banjo stand, and I know I'm being obnoxious, but I say “So Neil, what are you doing now?”

“Putting the banjo in the car,” he says.

“Perfect. Then?”

“Getting the money from them.”

“Then?”

“When you start playing the Jesus song, I'm going to fetch the car,” he says.

I tell him he's great and I thank him.

And then in his own, adorable way, he puts all the stuff he's holding down on the stage, and he hugs me, and he just says “Come boy, it's time now” — like I'm going off to war, or something.

I look at the setlist.

I see I'd planned to do a love song after the Stones cover — one of mine, but it sounds a lot like an old spiritual I learned off a Harry Smith CD somebody gave me once. It's called ‘Bed Down In Your Hair’, and it's very obviously about Holly.

No one else has ever been crazy about the song, even though I've always liked it, and I've even made myself cry playing it once or twice — so I think okay, I'll just do ‘Heart Of Gold’, and I go off stage and fetch my harmonica holder and put the G-harp in it.

While I'm putting the harmonica on, I check and see that next, I've drawn a big star on the setlist. Underneath the star I've written ECHO — and just like always, I feel safe when I see that.

Echo's a steel-body resonator, with this greyburst paintjob that I swear is the saddest, prettiest thing to look at in the world. I wear fingerpicks when I play her, as well, so there's this place under the strings where I've scratched away the paint and she shines through like a mirror — and even though most days when I look at her, I wish I'd never scratched her, and that she was perfect still — I've also seen photos of when the stage lights catch that shiny spot, and it *is* gorgeous.

I basically just play blues on her — slide stuff, lots of covers. I do some originals as well, but if I'm honest, you wouldn't really be able to tell they *weren't* covers. I sort of play the same stuff over and over, but with Echo it doesn't matter, because when I'm playing her right, she rings like a churchbell — and even if I just sat there and worked the slide over one fret, just so it made that watery, crying sound — you'd want me to keep doing it for hours.

I see I've planned to do a Bukka White, a Son House and a Fred McDowell, then one I wrote called 'Bossman', that's basically a combination of the other three songs except I tune the F# down to F and stick a capo on the first fret so it's in Eb-minor, which is sort of an easy key to sing well in for me.

After that, I see it's 'Jesus' Wild Years', and then another star to tell me to get Evangeline — but I'm not doing that tonight, so I decide to play another one before I pick up Echo, and it comes to me that I should just segue 'Heart Of Gold' into 'Out On The Weekend' — because I use to do that all the time, and it really works.

I stretch the new string a little, then switch on the condenser mic and start picking the string, and I tune it up and then fiddle until I'm sure it's in. Then I test the other strings and switch on the other mic — and I say hello to everyone again, and I ask them if they like Neil Young.

From the moment I start that riff, I know 'Heart Of Gold' is going to go fine — and I'm on autopilot until the segue, and that goes fine as well.

But even though I used to do it all the time, it's actually been a while since I've played 'Out On The Weekend' — and it's the strangest thing, but when the first chorus comes, I hear that pedal steel part Ben Keith plays on the album — I mean actually *hear* it, just keening away in my head. I hear that high, lonely sound, and my face goes hot and my voice cracks while I'm singing — but in a good way, in a way like she'd be able to tell that I'm really feeling it — and the whole song's a little bit magic after that, and I sing the chorus three times at the end and when I'm finished, people go nuts.

There's just like a hundred of them, but it's the first time tonight they've all been clapping at the same time — and while I go fetch Echo and take the harmonica holder off and have a big sip of my whiskey, I'm thinking Fuck Holly, I'm *glad* you're out there.

I go sit down again, and I bring the guitar mic closer, and I get my slide and my fingerpicks out the bag I keep in my shirt pocket. Then I check the tuning and even though normally I hate doing it, I speak to the crowd again because I feel like they probably want me to.

I say, "Thanks so much. I'm going to play some blues now" — and I do like a cheap little riff with the slide on the bass strings.

It makes them cheer, though, and I get an idea.

I go "Ja, it's always my favourite fucking part of the evening too" but I time it so I break into 'The Sky Is Crying' as soon I've said it — and it's such a great riff, and I see people stand up and dance, and I start stamping my foot so hard I can hear the sound coming back at me out the monitors.

It's a bit of a rough version, but it kicks — and when it's finished I know it doesn't matter what I do from here, they'll be along for the ride.

I breathe a little and drink more whiskey, and some of it stays in my beard and I wipe it away with my hand — and for some reason, it makes them cheer at me again.

I always say this thing I sort of stole from Cash, "Don't worry, this is just what the tap water looks like here" — and of course they laugh and everything, but I start to worry about how the whole thing made me look.

I've played the next songs probably five hundred times each on stage in my life, and I get through them okay. But from my side at least, the spell's been broken — and I'm sort of hearing myself play mostly, while my mind gets stuck on worrying about Holly and what she's doing here, and if I've done okay so far.

Before I start the last one, I say "Thanks everybody. I'm here again tomorrow night, same time."

Then I worry that's not enough to make sure she comes back, so even though I know it's going to sound ridiculous, I say, "And I'll be honest with you, tonight I was probably like 80%. Tomorrow I'll be fucking wonderful."

I play 'Jesus' Wild Years', and everyone always likes that one — it's got a cool riff and a good hook — and a few of them, mainly a table full of girls, start shouting for another song.

I say, and I say it very slowly, and I try to put like an earnest tone in it so hopefully she gets the message, "No, sorry, I'm running off now. Come back tomorrow night though, please."



Even though the guesthouse Neil's got us staying in is nice — way nicer than usual — I haven't slept yet.

I was sort of hoping to speak to Neil about Holly last night, but he passed out on the couch in the lounge after we'd got home from the gig and unpacked the van.

It's a small couch, and the way he was lying on it would have made him sore in the morning — so I woke him up and helped him to his room. And then when I put him into bed, I saw half a joint in an ashtray on the windowsill, and I wondered for a long time about smoking it.

I thought it might help just kill off my thoughts — or at least slow them down, like it used to, so I could get a grip on them, and feel some peace before I went to bed.

But I sort of drew a line in the sand with the stuff like seven years ago, so I knew that even if I just smoked a little bit, I would've got fucked up — and my head would've spun and my heart would've beat in double-time, and I might've even got a cold sweat and thrown up and everything.

So I just went to my room and took off my clothes and lay down on the bed, and I tried not to think bad thoughts, and I even tried to make up a little daydream where I sang Holly back into my life. I kept my eyes open the whole time, and I suppose the room was beautiful. The moonlight coming in through the window had shadows in it, and without my shirt on, it looked like I was tattooed in oak leaves.

But, I don't know, there were mosquitoes in the room and they made it impossible for me to sleep, and I couldn't keep my thoughts from going to hurtful places — and for hours, everything that came into my head just made me feel like a fucking *joke* — and I got more and more heartsick about it.

I got that sad, sick, anxious feeling in my chest. The one that makes me just want to give up.

But I do this thing these days, whenever I feel this way and I can't play guitar anymore — instead of just sleeping through it, or crying, or getting high — I make myself walk.

It must be five in the morning now, and I'm naked except for my boxers — but it's not that dark in the room, so I go over to my bag and I find some shorts and a t-shirt, and clean socks and my walking shoes. I dress in the dark, and then I go brush my teeth.

I find the envelope from last night in the lounge, and take a twenty out of it, for coffee — and I fold the note, and put it in my sock.

Then I find the keys to the guesthouse, and I let myself out through the kitchen door. The little garden out there is bright blue, and full of shadows and insect noises, and I can smell rain in the air.

Since I was really young, this has been my favourite time of the day — half an hour before you see the sun, when everything's blue but there're still a few stars, and the trees are black, and there aren't that many house lights on, but when they are they look like candles; and there aren't that many cars on the road, but when they pass you, you get like a shadow-show from the headlights. And the streetlamps — especially when they're like those old iron ones, with the deep orange light — at this time of day, they can make the whole world seem like an oil painting.

Our guesthouse is in a nice neighbourhood — the houses are big and they're built far back from the road, and they're made of stone and all the gardens have trees in them.

Most of them look like haunted houses, and they make me think of Grahamstown — that digs I lived in on Grey Street, with the willow tree and the cellar.

And it's fucked — but while I'm thinking about that house, I see her again.

She's about two hundred metres up the road, and she's walking straight towards me.

I get worried, you know, that I'm just making it up — so I sort of look away, and close my eyes, and then look back.

And there's her hair like a glory round her head, and there're her shoulders, and that's the way she walks.

There's a scared part of me, honestly — a real coward lives in my stomach — and for a while I think about hiding, but there's no time to do it properly. I just lean on a telephone pole and let her get very close to where I am.

She actually passes me before I go "*Holly*" and she stops.

She doesn't look up.

It looks like she's also having a thing where she's not sure if it actually happened, so I say "Here, I'm over here."

When she turns to me, it takes everything to force down that feeling like I want to cry. I cough, so my voice won't crack, and I say "Jeez, it *is* a small town, hey?"

"Oh it's tiny," she says, and she smiles at me. "If you don't count those hideous things they've built along the highway for the students."

And just for a second, her eyes get that really kind, loving look in them — it's the most beautiful thing about her, when it happens.

She says “So, how’ve you been?” — and we both laugh.

Then I can’t think of anything to say for a while.

Eventually, I say “Shit, I’m speechless here Holly. Sorry” — but what I’m thinking about is how weird it is always feeling this way around her. How it never changes. How my chest is starting to hurt in the same place it used to — sort of just below my heart, but in the middle.

She says, “You look a bit scary with your beard.”

“I know. I don’t really like it,” I say.

She laughs and says, “Why do you keep it?”

I tell her it makes me feel disguised. And then I’m not even sure why, but I say “Hey Holly, where does *this* place remind you of?” — and I point to the house behind the telephone pole.

I see her face sink.

It happens to the corners of her eyes, and the creases her smile’s put in around her mouth, and her lips — and she just shakes her head, once, and then when she’s moving some of that hair out her face, I can see she’s close to crying — and I feel so bad about saying anything about the house because, and I’m being honest now, I think this is sort of how I *wanted* her to react.

If you can believe it, Holly and I were only actually *together* for a week, in that house in Grey Street — much later than the four years I was in love with her through high school.

Back then, she was really into the church thing, and I went to a christian school, and I don’t know — I never went all-in on that stuff, but I suppose there’re certain ages where things work harder on your imagination than others — anyway, there was a good year or two back then where I truly believed that Holly was a living, breathing godsend; and every once in a while, when I was just in that mood or whatever, I’d pray, and tell god how perfect he’d made her.

Four years, and I only got to kiss her once before I went to London — the fucking night before I left South Africa. She wasn’t the first girl I’d kissed, obviously, but she was the only one I’d ever really wanted to kiss — and I only kissed her once, but you can imagine how it made me feel. I probably wanted to rip up my ticket to London, and she probably sensed it — because when it was over, she said “Remember James, we haven’t promised each other anything.”

Now I’ve replayed that a million times to myself, and I still don’t know if it was like a cruel thing or a kind thing for her to have said. I sort of *make* myself take it like she just wanted me to have a good time while I was away — you know, to feel free from her, or whatever.

And even though London was the first time I’d ever been in a big city, and every day I’d get amazed by the women drifting past me on the street, or just sitting on the tube, in their own little worlds; and even though sometimes one of those faces would haunt me for days and make me do legitimately insane things, like go back to the place I saw it, at the same time I saw it, with a letter in my hand or a whole speech prepared in my head — I knew they were more like ghosts than women, anyway, and I stayed in love with Holly the whole time I was there.

We wrote each other letters, never emails, and I must have read all the ones she sent me a hundred times each. I could probably still quote them to you, thirteen years down the line. She ended

up spending that year at home in Knysna — writing a lot, and drawing, and doing a few drugs — and apparently she had a boyfriend for a while who was like 25 and had his own house.

But then quite late in the year, in the same letter I found out that the dude had broken up with her about a month before, and that she'd decided she was going to go to Rhodes — and it was sort of impulsive, but my money was tight and my lease was ending, and I didn't want to go through another winter on my own — so I came home in December and found the place on Grey Street.

I think of that room I rented. It had snow-white walls and amber floorboards, and a fireplace and a windowseat, and I remember being in there with the estate agent, and actually talking to *him* about how much she was going to love it — and it makes me feel embarrassed and tragic, and even though she's looking as sad as she is, I say "Well fuck Holly, I'm sorry. One of us was going to say something though. I've been crazy since I saw you last night."

She says, "I know, I'm sorry."

I tell her "Come on, I didn't mean it like that. I just don't know how to be around you. That's what I meant."

And she says "Well, then that's why I'm sorry."

I can't really say anything back to that, and I can feel another silence coming on and I don't want it to happen — so I say "Listen. You know how I was on stage last night? You know, like drinking, and acting like I'm a rock star? That's not actually me anymore, hey. I try really hard not to be that way anymore — you know, in real life."

She says, "Don't worry, it looked like you were acting. Just don't swear so much. Coarse people use coarse language," she says — but she's smiling again.

"So will you be there again tonight?" I ask her.

"Are you going to be fucking wonderful?" she says, and I just smile back at her.

After a while, I say "Never thought you'd wind up in Stellenbosch, Holly. I have to admit."

"Well, we moved for Steven," she says, and she keeps talking about Steven's job and then about how she actually likes the place now and whatever — she keeps talking but I'm gone, all I'm thinking is No fucking way. She's still with *Steve*?

I don't think she's finished talking yet, but I go "You're still with *Steve*?" — and there must be something about the way I say it, or maybe just the look I've got on my face — because she goes quiet, and I know I've hurt her feelings again.

"Wow," I say, trying to save it, "So did you guys get married and everything?"

"I'm going to go now," she says, and she turns around.

I go, "No wait—"

And her back's still turned to me, but she says "Don't worry, it's fine. I'll see you tonight, James."

I feel angry all of a sudden. Angry and like I've been fucked over — but all I do about it is shout "I'm sorry" at her, while she walks away.

She puts one of her hands up like she's saying "Never mind" — but she doesn't turn around.

I walk away, back the way I came — and I go fast, until I'm out of breath and I feel hungover, and I have to stop for a while and rest.

I sit down on the pavement, with my feet in the road, and I get this weird urge to hurt myself in some way, and then I feel like I want to scream — and then I feel like I want to go back to the guesthouse and just smoke Neil's stash, and sleep all day.

I feel so tired all of a sudden. Tired and sick, and needy.

I take a few deep breaths and I tell myself that if I really have to, I'm allowed to get a loose cigarette to smoke on the way home — and I just sit there and breathe, and force myself to imagine how unhappy Steve must have made her by now.

I just imagine her being miserable, and under-loved — and I know this sounds bad — but I really get into the idea. I actually start to feel positive about things — like thank god she's still with *him*, because if she'd found somebody nice, I'd really be fucked.

This way, there's a chance still.

I stand up and head back to the guesthouse, and I don't even want a cigarette anymore. I feel steeled, and all I'm thinking is how perfect this would be if it worked out. Maybe perfect in a bit of an ugly way, because Steve's going to get hurt, but whatever — there'll always be someone who's hurting because of Holly — and I don't know Steve's story, but I know mine, and I *need* this to happen.

I was sixteen — that's like half my *life*-ago, now — when I realised that if I never got to be her boyfriend, I might always feel numb about being alive. And I was reading a lot of Camus at the time, and I thought I was understanding it properly — anyway, I started to worry that I needed *something* in my life to dissuade me from suicide, and in the end, I begged my dad to buy me a guitar.

I called that first one Grace, and I suppose she was like the first, I don't know, rung in the ladder or whatever — like I've been going a certain way, ever since she came along.

I got obsessive about playing that guitar — and it was a funny thing, but Holly wasn't crazy about Grace at all. She'd never say why, even though I worried about it, and asked her all the time please just to tell me what the problem was.

On days when I'm feeling up about myself, obviously, I think it's because she felt the guitar was distracting me from her. Mostly though, I think it's because she worried that I'd fail at it, and that it'd just end up being another reason for me to run myself down. I did that — you know, like hate myself in front of other people — I did that a lot when I was growing up.

I was paranoid she'd break on the plane, so I left Grace at home when I went to England. But after being there for five weeks, I had a job and I'd been paid for the first time in my life — and even though I was having fun, I promise, some evenings I got so lonely I found it hard to breathe — and the only thing I could think of to help myself was buying a £30 guitar from a catalogue in Argos.

I called her Cassandra, and she sounded as cheap as she was, and she wasn't very easy to play. But because I was living with a Turkish couple who hated speaking English, and because it was winter and it was dark and cold outside all the time, and I didn't know a soul in London — I ended up playing for like six hours, every single day.

And I suppose my hands got clever, and I started smoking and it did great things to my voice — and I got some confidence in myself, and I started writing my own songs, and putting like a little set together.

Then at the end of February, when it got warmer, I started busking at tube stations after work, and in April an Australian guy gave me his card and said I could play at his bar every week if I wanted to, and I got more gigs, I even did one at the Borderline opening for James Taylor's kid — and when I worked out I could do it so long as I ate less and drank less, I quit my job and lived off the money I brought in from gigging.

I met cool people and I played in really romantic bars — and just in the way I was living, even though there were whole weeks where I had to eat stuff like chicken seasoning on toast, I felt like I'd stumbled across some kind of secret, and that it'd keep me happy forever.

Every night I went to sleep picturing Holly's face — and telling myself that she had to love me, if I was a musician now. You know, like who *wouldn't*?

When I get back to the guesthouse, the sky's still overcast, but it's a light grey that looks like it might burn off when the sun gets up.

I go into my room and check the time.

I try remember when Neil passed out, and I work out if it's nearly half-six now, he's had about seven hours sleep — so I go get my instruments from the lounge, and I lay the cases side-by-side on the floor in front of the bed, and I get the tuner out of Loretta's case and I check that all the strings, all seventeen of them, are perfectly in.

I want to sit for a while, and play, and get a set together that's so perfect god himself'd fall in love with me — but I'm so tired, I can't bring myself to actually get an instrument out of its case.

Sleep's out of the question, though. There's too much to do.

I go into the kitchen and put the kettle on, and find a Bodum in the cupboard, and some coffee in the fridge. I put four big spoons of coffee in, and I pour three mugs of boiling water on top of it, and I take the plunger and the mug into my room with me.

While I drink the coffee, I think about what happened with Holly in Colesberg — I suppose because no matter how hard I try not to, I *know* I'll say something about it when I see her tonight. I just know I won't be strong enough to keep it in.

The first time I saw her again after London was in Grahamstown, in February. When I said goodbye to her before I left, she was wearing a school tracksuit, and her hair was tied up tight — so tight it hurt her when I put my hands in it while we were kissing. That was sort of the image I kept, but the first time I saw her when I got home — *jesus*, she was wearing this daisyblue dress that was cut at an angle, so you just saw one of her legs, and she was wearing eyeshadow, but in a way that looked like she should've been born with it on, and she'd teased her hair and put some spray in it or something — anyway, she'd made it like art — and she'd done something to her lips, so they shone, and I noticed she'd started to show her teeth when she smiled.

And I promise, seeing her like that — for me, it just sort of put petrol on the fire.

I'd been seeing a really nice girl called Shylo for about a month, but I ended that when varsity started, and I started spending a lot of time with Holly — and she did a similar thing a few weeks later, when she broke up with Steve.

It was a really strange time.

Holly was drinking a lot and I think she might have been depressed. I know *I* was depressed at least, and the drinking and the pot I was smoking wasn't helping me — it just had me feeling restless and panicked all the time, and my stomach was always burning, or in knots.

But with her, there'd be nights when she'd get very drunk, and actually go a little crazy. You know, like act really out of character or whatever. Like the once, we were at a bar and she cut herself with a broken beer bottle — on the arm, until it bled. I still remember that it was green glass she used, and that she'd cried the whole way back to her house when I walked her, and that when I said goodnight, I'd kissed her hand, and seen the blood, like red dirt on the skin around her nails.

And it was during *this* time that she finally wanted to be with me. The one fucking time in our lives when both of us were in crisis — and it'd only lasted a week, and if I'm honest, it hadn't really felt right at all.

Every day, it just felt like we were making each other worse — and then early one morning, we couldn't sleep and we were sobering up, and I'd made her cry for some reason and I was trying to get her to stop, and I remember, all of a sudden, I got angry with her — it was the first time I'd ever been angry with her, and I said something like "This is fucked, Holly. We can't keep going this way."

And I don't know what she thought I was talking about, but she stopped crying almost rightaway. And I'd gone on — I'd told her we were wasting ourselves, and that she needed to trust me when I told her we were going to be special.

It seems a bit ridiculous to me now, like something that happened in a dream I wish I never had — but I looked at her, and I said "You can sing, can't you? Let's just hit the road together. Come on. Trust me."

And she smiled at me then, and just like a little girl, she said, "Do you really think I'm special?"

And I remember going close to her — she has a dark fleck in her left iris, and I remember seeing that — and I put my hand on her face, and I said "Holly, it's impossible for me to be wrong about this."

We packed up my instruments and a few clothes and some books, and we got in her car and filled it up and started driving to Joburg, because I told her I'd always wanted to play at the Bassline. The drive went really slowly, and we got a flat tyre near Aliwal North, and when we got to Colesberg it was raining and dark — so we ended up stopping at this motel at the edge of town — like a really noir sort of place, with a neon sign and everything.

And we drank cheap wine we got from the bar, and sang a few songs in our room together, and that was the only time we ever had sex — and I remember how she looked, every bit of her, and I remember how she'd let me go to sleep with my head on her chest, and how the sleep had been bottomless.

But when I woke up, she hadn't been in bed. It was still early in the morning, dark in the room but she had a lamp on, and she was already dressed, and packed, and her eyes looked stormy and she barely said a thing to me — and when she tried to give me money to get a bus home with, I tore it, and when she left the room, I chased her outside, just in my boxers, and I got on my knees and begged her to stay with me — I fucking told her I'd *marry* her, right there in the parking lot, with my fucking knees in puddles.

She got in her car, and it started and then I ran after it, and I caught her at the security gate, and I made her wind down her window so I could tell her that she'd be seeing my name up in lights — and that I'd be waiting for her to come and find me.

And obviously then it became like a pride thing for me to keep on going to Joburg — my dad had a new girlfriend at the time, so he was distracted with her and didn't seem to mind what I did; and I had my tax money from England, so basically I could do whatever I wanted; and I remembered I had a friend in Bryanston who I called, and he said I could stay with him for as long as I wanted.

For about two years, I just played as many places as I could. I ended up recording an album with a guy, and I did a *lot* of shows on the back of it — and I promise, every night I'd look out into the crowd for her, and it sounds insane, but every night I'd believe — and I mean *really* believe — that she'd be there, somehow.

But whatever part of me it was that did that kind of hoping, just disappeared in its time, and it was weird but I sort of went back to feeling like I did when I was a teenager — and I suppose because I hoped it would legitimise me, I got a few real jobs for a while, and hated all of them — and I had two girlfriends, but with both of them, before we broke up I'd got so remote there were nights where they lay in my arms and I felt lonelier than ever before in my life, and unbidden, Holly's face would appear in my mind, and just torture me until I fell asleep.

And it was after the second one of those girls, while I was fucked up and doubting myself, that I felt like it might be a good idea just to tour around for a while, and play a lot of music — and that's when I got hooked up with Neil.

It was only ever meant to be for like a year.

But Neil's great, and I suppose I've got used to not living anywhere specific, and I suppose I even sort of like it now, that drifting feeling. It's almost like what I used to get from smoking pot all the time — a whole life full of present-tense, and a future just waiting for me to own up to it, and take it seriously.

I've tried — fuck knows, I've worked hard at this music thing. But I've never been big, not even close to it, and I've been on stage with some guys who've made me feel like a permanent hack. I used to play all this old American stuff just because I loved it — and because I saw there was something simple and direct about it, and those were things *I* wasn't — and just playing the stuff, I swear, I used to find it so consoling. And I keep playing it now, even though mostly, I've got hard to those feelings — I keep playing it because I *have* to, because people here can't really tell that I'm not that good at it. It's like a novelty thing, here — but I know, I wouldn't get a gig in the States — or maybe I would, but

it'd be at like a coffeeshop or something, not a proper place. What really sealed it, was a few years ago, they thought it'd be a good idea for me to make what they kept calling an "African album" — and they got some real cats in, to play djembes and mbiras and umrhubhes, and they made me play one of those petrol-can electric guitars, and sing in a bit of an accent — and I hated the thing from the start, and someone from PE told me, and this is the just the way I think about it now, it only got two stars out of five in the fucking Weekend Post.

I pour the last mug of coffee out the plunger, but I know I won't drink it.

I know I'm not going to sing anytime soon, either, and I get tempted to go to sleep.

But instead, I go into the bathroom and get undressed. I pull back the curtain, and I'm about to turn on the shower — and then I catch sight of myself in the mirror —

And then, naked, I sneak into Neil's room, and dig around in his bag, and I find his razor and his cream.

Then I go back to my bathroom, and run a basin, and start shaving off my beard.



It's the first thing that happens when I get on stage — someone says something about my beard being gone.

It feels nice, because it probably means they were here last night as well, and I say "Ja, it ran off with a lumberjack in the night," and some people laugh — and I start playing a song of mine called 'Cigarettes For Breakfast', which is basically just a 12-bar foot-stomp that normally I keep for later on, for when people need a lift — but I'm planning on killing myself on stage tonight, and I want them in the mood the whole time.

While I'm singing, I look for her in the crowd.

She's nowhere — but I don't let myself get disappointed — I tell myself, I just need to make sure there's a real vibe going when she comes.

It took me the whole day to get the setlist right. I gave Neil three concerts — made him sit there and listen to everything I did. On the third go-around, I even told him to imagine he was Holly, and you should have seen him — he's fucking hilarious — he smoked a joint and closed his eyes, and lay down on the couch, and said "Okay, I'm Holly now. Play nice James, I mean it. Take it seriously."

I look at him when I start the next song — it's a cover of 'White Freightliner Blues' — and he's looking at me, nodding his head and he gives me a thumbs-up when my voice goes high on the chorus-line, like I'm getting it.

She walks in near the end of the song.

And right behind her is Steve.

The fucking idiot, he's wearing a fucking *suit* — and I can see even from the stage that his hairline is receding like crazy.

I see Holly sit down near the back, and Steve go off to the bar, and even though it's not on the setlist, when the time comes, I do a segue into 'Who Do You Love?' — that Bo Diddley song Townes sang all the time — and I strum it really hard. I feel the callous on the back of my finger open up, and I change the lyrics so they go "I'm just 31 and I don't mind dying" — and I sing that over and over again, and I'm staring straight at her — and she gets a little awkward about it and she looks away, and doesn't look back till the song's finished.

I've got in the habit, the last few years or so, of playing two sets — maybe ten songs in the first one, then six or seven after the break — I suppose because it works out easier for me that way. I definitely sweat less than I used to — and if it's just one of those nights where everything sounds shit, sometimes I can drink enough during the break to make sure I don't really notice the second set going by.

Tonight though, I'm just doing twenty back-to-back, and I haven't had anything to drink and I'm not going to — just water for my voice. Even if *Holly* bought me a whiskey, I'd say No thanks.

I decide it's time to say something to the crowd, so I tell them Thanks for coming out and I tell them I feel like it's going to be a special one — and they cheer and everything, like they believe me.

And for a while, all the songs go really well. I feel so *present* — like I'm *in* them, and I spend most the set singing with my eyes closed, just concentrating on putting every note in its place.

But after I'm about two-thirds of the way in, I start thinking about the encore — and even during the resonator songs, I can't stop my mind from going there.

I start to doubt I'm ready for it — like, emotionally — and I wish everything would just slow down.

I wish I could kick everybody else out, and just play it for her.

'I am Weary, Let me Rest' is a religious song, actually — it's about someone who's dying, except they're sort of happy, because they know they're on their way to heaven to see their mother again. And it's just like three chords, but I don't think I'll ever be able to write a song like it — there's just something straight-up, and brave, and *reassuring* about that melody — and you can't fake that stuff.

Even though it's basically a hymn, the first time I heard it — it was on a Best of Bluegrass album I found for ten bucks in a bin in CNA — I lay in bed and thought about Holly, and I wept.

I'd just got the banjo, and I learned how to play the song on it that same day, and I've been doing it as my encore ever since. I've always done that — get *obsessed* with a song, and play it night after night after night, like a little ritual for myself. Before this one, while I was quitting pot, I used to switch between 'Don't Let The Devil Ride' and 'Get Back Satan', or sometimes I'd even just mash them up; and before that — back when I was depressed, and impudent about it, and feeling all the time like *I* was the loneliest person god had ever made — it was always 'Out On The Weekend'.

'I am Weary' has never been a safe one, though — and I suppose that's why it's lasted the longest. It needs to be slow, and quiet, and gorgeous, and most of the time, I can't actually get my voice to go to all the places it should — to follow the song, like it winds through my head. But when I get it right,

maybe it's happened five or ten times, when I open my throat on the chorus-line and it comes out pure — *that* feeling — feels like the only thing I've ever really earned in my whole life.

When I'm done with 'Jesus' Wild Years', I say Goodbye and thank you to the crowd — and they cheer quite loud, and some young dudes with tight jeans and gel in their hair start shouting for one more.

I look at Neil, and he just smiles at me, and nods his head — and I see him cup his hands around his mouth, and shout for another one as well.

I look at Holly — but she's got her eyes down, and she doesn't look up.

I stand up with Echo and go put her back on her stand. I feel my leg shaking a bit, at the knee.

I pick up Evangeline and go sit down — and even though I've only done two songs on her tonight, I check that she's in tune. Then I play with my fingerpicks a bit, just squeezing them on as tight as I can.

I'm about to start picking it, when I say "Ja, thanks again everybody. Here's one I do all the time."

And I nearly start picking it again — when something takes me over, and I look straight at her and go, "And fuck, you know Holly, I've been doing it every night for six years now like a hymn to you. Like calling you back to me" — and I start picking it then, and go straight into the first verse and I swear I've *never* hit that note so well, and I change the lyrics and put her name in them, and my eyes are closed and I hear the banjo and my voice coming back at me through the monitor and I'm not a proud man, but I promise it's *right*, it's the way it *has* to sound — and I get to the first chorus and when I do the "I am *weeeary*" bit, it feels like my whole chest is full of light, and I feel tears on my cheeks, and my face is warm like someone's holding it in their hands.

And just then, I open my eyes, and I can see there's a couple in the front row, holding each other's hands and she's crying a little as well — but then they turn around, and my eyes follow —

And I see Steve coming straight towards the stage, his jacket's off and his tie's loose and his face is red and his eyes are weird and narrow, and I sort of get a sense of what's about to happen, but I keep playing, I keep singing, even when he jumps up on stage and I suppose I stop and try duck my head at the last second — but he hits me really fucking hard on the side of my mouth, and before I know it I'm off my chair, and Neil's on stage with his arms around Steve, calling him a cunt and everything on my behalf, and the crowd are booing like nuts.

It's the first time I've ever been hit in my life, except by my dad on the arm or whatever — and the next thing I think, is that it must have been quite a thing to see, you know, if you were in the crowd.

I sort of feel embarrassed — and there's a lot of noise, and I think I see Steve getting pushed out the doors at the back. All I do is stand up and check on Evangeline, who's fine — so I put her on her stand, and then I get off the stage and walk to the toilet.

I drink some water and check in the mirror, but my face looks alright.

It's really sore, but there's no blood at least. Just a bit of swelling. Maybe it'll be purple in the morning.

When I leave the bathroom, instead of going back the way I came, I go through a door at the bottom of the hallway.

It leads outside, to some concrete steps — and it must be a service entrance, because the steps go down to a small courtyard, with a gate and a bright orange security light. It's misty outside though, and drizzling — so the light actually makes it sort of romantic, and the rain feels good on my face.

I'm outside for maybe two minutes on my own — then I hear the door open behind me, and she's there.

"Hi," I say.

And then, because I really don't want either of us to say anything about what just happened, I go "Did you see the rainbow this afternoon?"

And she says "Yes, it was beautiful."

"Do you know you get such a thing as a moonbow?" I say.

And she just looks at me, so I go on.

I say, "Honestly. It happens when sunlight getting bounced back off the moon gets wet — you know, just like a rainbow, but at night. And it's just like a pale silver thing, you don't get the seven colours — but still, it's quite a cool thing to think about. It makes me feel like I should never sleep."

She stays quiet, but I see her lick some rain off her top lip, and it nearly makes me scream.

I say, "For fuck's sake Holly, why did you leave me in Colesberg?"

And she starts crying — and I don't go hold her, even though I want to.

"Really, I thought that was going to be it," I say. "What did I do wrong?"

She looks at me, and I think Here comes something — but then she just bites her lip, and looks away.

Maybe a minute goes by while she just wipes her eyes, and breathes.

Finally, she says "You've got a smile-line, now. On your face. You never had that before."

And I don't know why — I *know* she's not being mean — but something inside me sort of breaks, when she says that.

It's hard to explain, but I feel like I've caught a glimpse of something behind the curtain — and now that magic-show stuff I've been feeling about her all day just seems sad, and wayward, and I'm wondering what I was expecting to happen here, anyway, and I'm wondering why I put us through it. I don't even mean to do it, but I sigh, really deeply — and she looks at me, and she looks so scared all of a sudden, and she says "What?"

I even see another tear come down her cheek — but it makes me happy, because I feel like I'm on the verge of a great kindness. I put my hand on her shoulder, so she *looks* at me — and I say "Holly, it's okay. I promise, I'm going to be brave now."

I get a flutter in my chest, and I can't meet her eyes anymore and it's like I'm hearing myself speak, and I hear myself say, "*This — me* — it's not your fault, Holly. Fuck. It's all me, I promise.

You know, I went through Knysna the other day and I don't know if you've been back there or if you've seen, but the township's come all the way up the valley, to the sides of the highway now. So they've put a fence up on the other side of the guardrail — but it's so full, there're shacks fucking *leaning* on the fence — and the whole thing looks like this horrible river that's about to burst its banks — I promise Holly, it looks like *hell* — and I was driving, and for like the next three hours, I tried to imagine what it'd be like to live that way, you know, with *nothing* around to distract you from your life, and how shit it is — and in the end, I know this sounds terrible, but I got *jealous* — jealous of how *whole* that must make you... I mean, me — I barely live in the world anymore. If I ever have. There's always just been something about me — really Holly, since I was young there's been something that keeps me just on the edge of feeling like I have a real life — and it's not your fault, but you have no idea how much I've wondered about you — about what it'd be like to be with you — these long fucking daydreams, where I'm different — where I'm *happy*, and I'm *nice* — and I'm not just waiting all the time for you to come wake me up, or plug me in, or save me, or whatever... And now, really, I'm so fucking tired of waiting, Holly — so listen — please, just listen. I think I've got it now. I don't think I'm *supposed* to fix this. I don't think it ends. I think this is just *it*, for me. I mean, I *had* you. I was *with* you — and fuck knows, I didn't get fixed. That's the worst I ever was."

She starts saying something back, but I put my hand up, and I say "No — please, Holly. Just listen. I'm telling you it's okay. It's okay if you don't love me. *I* need to stop — I need to stop dreaming that you have to. I mean... Fuck. I know I'd waste you, anyway."

And for the first time since I started talking, I look at her full-on — and she smiles, and wipes her cheeks with her hands again.

Then she reaches for my hand, and takes it in both of hers, and moves it up to her mouth.

And she puts her lips on it, very softly.

And she gets my other hand, so now both of them are in front of her — just floating there in the space between us.

In the mist and the glowing light, they look don't look real. They look like alabaster hands.

"Your hands," she says. "I've missed your hands" — and she takes her fingers, and moves them lightly over my palms.

She makes long, slow patterns — over my palms and between my fingers, and my hands are burning when she stops.

My hands are *burning*.

But I turn and go.

ALL THE WAY GONE

When his dad dropped him off, I was watching from behind the curtain — and as soon as he got out the car I saw it, they'd put stitches in the sleeve on his jacket so it didn't just hang loose like I worried it would, and his dad helped him put his bag on his back, then gave him his backpack in his hand, didn't carry anything for him, just waved and then watched him walk to me, watched him all the way and then just shook his head and got back in the car — and the first thing Willie did when he came through the door was drop his bags and come at me, the one arm at my clothes and everything, and he was kissing me, and he kept all his clothes on except pulling his pants down a little, so I just saw the jacket the whole time, and my dress didn't even come off, so he didn't have to see my scar.

It was the same jacket from all the photos he'd sent, I'd looked at it so many times it was definitely the same one — and I remember it being weird to *actually* feel it, there in my hands, after thinking for so long about how it was going to feel.

I was glad it finished quickly.

I think he thought it was a sweet thing to do, maybe because that's how it'd been the other times he'd come home — but wow, it was *scary* for a little while. And weird. I kept waiting for him to hold me properly.

Afterwards, I wanted to show him his son — you don't know for how long I'd wanted to do that. You could see it wasn't what he wanted to do, but he came through to the room. Jacques was sleeping. I'd kept him up late the night before because I knew Willie'd be home in the morning.

It was so hot, the whole of that February, sometimes forty in the day, thirty at night — so Jacques was sleeping just with a t-shirt on. The first thing Willie said — he was at the doorway, far back from the cot, and he just shook his head when I told him to come closer — he stood on his tip-toes, and looked at Jacques, and said "Check his little dick."

I can't remember what we did with the rest of the day. We ate sandwiches, and we had a sleep, but there must of been other stuff as well. I remember every thing about that night though. It was another thing I'd planned for.

I made supper — some steak Willie's dad'd brought, and pumpkin pie, and green beans with salt and lemon — but Willie'd gone to shower just when things were getting ready, and I thought I'd judge it properly and serve up just at the right time, but he ended up taking so long in the shower everything

got cold, and it had to go back in the oven and I just knew it was going to be dry and horrible when it came out. He was in the shower for an hour, at least — and it was right then, I could feel it, it was while I waited for him in the kitchen that I started sliding back, all the way back, to those dark places I'd found since he'd been away, just staring at some candles I'd lit burn down and that feeling of why, why, why — why does it have to be like this forever now?

It was a hot night, but he came through in his dressing-gown, with a t-shirt underneath. He didn't say anything, he just ate, fast, so fast I couldn't believe it — with his eyes down the whole time, like the only thing in the world was his plate.

Ever since I was little, I've hated looking at loose sleeves, and empty pants, and things like that — and I'd only had a little bit of my food, but when I heard Jacques crying, even though that's just how he is, he's never slept nicely, I acted like he needed me and I left the table.

I went to shower after that — and to clean myself nicely, and I put on this nightie I'd bought about a month before, a black one, with just a bit of pink ribbon on the hem, and I put on some perfume I'd saved from a magazine.

I wasn't long or anything, even with Jacques, it was half a hour at the most — but when I left the bathroom, I heard this moaning coming from the kitchen. Moaning like something bad'd happened. I ran there, calling "Willie! Willie!" and he didn't say anything back — just more moaning.

Nothing was wrong, he was fast asleep. It would of been quite sweet — both plates were in front of him, both clean, with his arm in between them and his head on his arm — except he was grinding his teeth so hard it sounded like he was chewing rocks, and he just kept on moaning, and I tried everything to wake him up, shaking him, calling his name, everything, I even poured a glass of water to throw on him but when it came down to it, I was so scared, I went to the bedroom and closed the door, and just put the radio on softly and lay there, till finally I went to sleep.

That whole first day was awful, and the next day was when we tried to do some talking and he ended up staying quiet, instead. I never watched the tv so I cancelled the satellite, that was months ago, and he was angry about it. He still didn't let me see him without his shirt on. And the night was nearly the same as the one before — except it was worse, because he slept in the bed.

The third day was when I knew.

It started with a big thing, after I made us look at each other's scars. I don't know, it seemed like the right thing to do, but it didn't go nearly like I hoped. He looked so scared, I thought it'd be easier for him if I showed first — but when I lifted up my shirt, all he said was "That's *it?*" — and before I knew it there was shouting, from both sides, and then I was crying. When he finally showed his, it was actually alright to look at. The arm was clean off, and the skin was folded in at the shoulder, and the scar wasn't even that big — but it looked sore still, and pink, like it wasn't better yet.

But that was just a fight. It wasn't the real thing. I'd been living with Willie since I was sixteen, he'd left for the first time just when school finished for me — and I know you get stories like that, you get people like that, who just stay together, go all the way down the line. And even though I never thought that was going to be Willie and me, even at school I didn't think that, the way we talked after

the fight, I think that was the first time we'd ever *shown* each other, this thing I had inside me, and I knew he had inside him — that it didn't matter anymore — on the inside, what we had was finished, long ago already.

Willie had his shirt back on, and he was lying in bed and I was trying to get him to talk — and he just wouldn't. All he'd say, he said it like a hundred times, he'd just say "You won't understand. You'll never understand" — again and again, till I stopped even being angry about it, and it just started to hurt. I sat there, quiet, for a long time, breathing and breathing to make sure my voice was going to be okay — and thinking, as carefully as I could, so I'd say the right thing.

I said, "I've had a life here too, Willie."

"Ja, exactly," he said.

"It hasn't been great."

"Well, the army was awesome," he said — and that was it, just then, I promise — for me, it was like I could *hear* the thing between us go snap.

A bad memory I had — for some reason, just one of them shot into my head, and I said "Okay, fine. You think for a while about the worst thing you saw, the whole time you were gone, and you tell it to me. I'll do the same. I know what mine is. The worst thing, Willie."

He was just quiet, so I went on.

"Ja okay, so mine didn't happen overseas, or in a war or anything, fine. It happened just on the road back from PE one night."

I told him it was the first time I'd been off the farm in three months — since the time we went to Jeffrey's for the weekend, before he'd left. I told him I'd had to go to a proper doctor because it was just after I'd found out, about being pregnant and everything — but how even though that's what we went down for, we ended up going shopping, as well — and how his mom'd bought me a new dress, big size, so I could wear it for months, and how we had lunch in the Woolworths, and then we went with his dad to go look at computers, and how his dad'd even bought one. I told him it was getting dark already, when we left — and how the road was quiet the whole way, and the moon came out, and how we were all talking to each other in the car, just like a family — like we would of been, if he was there. I told him I remembered, clear as day, that was the happiest I'd been since he'd been away — right there in the back seat, listening to his mom talking.

It was just after one of those game farms when we saw it — this car in front of us. We saw its lights, and we saw the guy was driving all over the road — really, it was so bad, Willie's dad even said "Is he drunk or something?" And then we started climbing, this steep part of the road, we went up and then because it was so bright, we could see the bend of the road coming up in the distance, it was like daytime you could see it so clearly, it was black and the sky was bright behind it — but the car in front of us just didn't turn, it just kept going, straight off the edge.

I said, "It was how *normal* it looked, Willie. You know? He just *went* — and that's him, gone. And that's what it was — even before everything else, with Jacques, and you, and everything — that's

what taught me there's no such thing as nice days, Willie. Everywhere, now, *everywhere* something quick and bad like that's happening," I said.

I was crying a lot by the time I was done — and this big, sad feeling started to swell up inside me. He looked at me and said "Do I still have to say mine?" — and I must of got a look on my face or something, because he just said "Okay, okay" — then took a deep breath.

I said, "What? Is it about your arm?"

"No."

"Is it about seeing dead people? Like, with their guts out? You can talk about it, it's fine. Anything. Just talk, please."

"Ag," he said. "Guts and stuff, that's nothing. You get used to that stuff fast — shit, they showed us buck and stuff, all shot everywhere and cut open, eyeballs hanging out, long before they even gave us guns. Maybe if it was a friend it'd be different, I don't know, all my friends didn't get hurt."

"So then *what*, Willie?"

"But I've thinking about something else, now," he said.

I told him, "Tell me anyway. You have to."

He said, "Why? We're not married or anything."

And I don't know why I needed him to talk so badly right then, but I did, and I just kept going and going — until finally he just scratched his head, hard, then said "Okay, okay."

And then he told me. He told me it was while he was in East London — I remembered he went there, right before he was deployed. It was him and Danie, and some more South Africans, he told me they all got that week at home before they went over. He told me they got drunk, really drunk — and ended up going to a sex place. He told me they were there early, and he said he even remembered that it was a Tuesday night — and it was dead quiet. They were the only people in there, for hours, and they were drinking more, and making jokes about the place, and about how it was going to be with the girls and everything like that.

Then he said, "But, *fick*, you should of *seen* the girl that finally came out" — and then he told me about her.

About how she was the same as us, or maybe twenty-one — just a bit older. How she had dark hair, like me, and how she was tall, like me. And he said how the make-up she had on her eyes made her look like a nightmare, and how she had bruises, everywhere. He said in the beginning, she came close to get some money from them, and she put it in a little bag she had, tied around her thigh — and when she came close like that, he said he could see her nose'd been broken, and the bottom of her left ear was missing, like he could imagine once a guy'd ripped out her ear-ring and taken it with, something like that. And he said it was weird, because it wasn't even like a long, sexy dance or anything — like what happens in the movies — the radio just kept playing at the bar, and she had a candle with a condom on it on stage with her, and she just started using it.

He told me he didn't know why — maybe because they knew he had a girlfriend — but the other guys all put some more money in, and bought him a private dance. He called it that, and then it got

hard for him to speak. I could see. He kept talking, but it wasn't really to me anymore — it was more like the words were just coming out. He said how they went behind a curtain, into this room with a black carpet, and a yellow light, and dark red walls. And a mirror and a chair in the middle. And how she made him sit in the chair, then got a big thing of aqueous cream and put some on herself — and then took his hands, and made him rub it in.

Willie never cried before, I'd seen him do it *once*, when he was seventeen and one of his parents' dogs died — but he started to cry then, and he kept trying to say, "That's when I saw it" — but it took a long time to come out. He was quiet for a while, while he wiped his eyes. Then he said "She had a scar, like yours. But not like yours, baby, hers was fucking bumpy, and it was massive. It looked like it'd been there since *she* was a baby. And I was looking at her. I promise, you could see she used to be beautiful — she looked like *you* — except she was just fucked now, she was gone. All the way gone."

He wiped his eyes again, then he said "You say yours taught you something? Mine wasn't like that. The first time I thought about that girl again was in the hospital. I'd be lying there, just drugged to shit, trying to think about you — and then I'd remember what you told me about your scar, and I'd remember if I was *lucky*, I was going home to a son I could never hug, or play sport with, or anything — and that girl, her fucking name was Misty, *that's* when she came back to me. It was for months. I lay there, and I tried, but I couldn't get you into my head — it was always her, those eyes, the feel of that scar — it was always her that came, instead."

Right then, I heard Jacques crying in the other room — and I didn't even think about it, I promise, it was automatic — I just went through and picked him up. When he was in my arms and he'd stopped crying — as soon as I was leaving his room, carrying him, I heard Willie go into the bathroom and lock the door.

I went outside with Jacques.

And even though I ended up staying around for a couple more months with Willie, just helping him while he got a gum guard, and a automatic from a guy in Graaff-Rienet, and a new driver's licence and everything — when I went outside with Jacques that day — that was when I actually left, in my heart, that was when I left. I remember, it was probably eleven o'clock, but it was hot already, and so bright. I was walking him around in some shade, but still, I could feel myself start to sweat. Along the elastic in my dress, then on my lip. It was dead quiet, no wind. I could just hear Jacques, breathing.

We've lived in more places now, me and Jacques, not a lot, but a few — and still, it's strange, but whenever the sun's like that, when it's so bright the sky doesn't have any colour, and so hot nothing moves, even the wind doesn't blow — since I've been older, on days like that it's always the same, a mood gets me, and I just feel so *empty*, I promise. And I'll look at him, my little boy, and do you know what I'll think? I'll think the same thing I thought that day, when I had him there in my arms, I'll wonder if there's ever been a mother, I mean in the whole world — knowing how it goes, has there even been a mother that actually *wants* them to grow up? Is that what I'm actually meant to *want*?

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

This was the 30th of November, nearly eight years ago.

I was living in Tennessee, in what they call a college town — that gave way on the east to the Great Smoky Mountains, and on the west, to a snarl of highways and interstates.

I was in a bad way at the time and I wanted home, never mind the fact that I had been dying to make the trip a few months earlier, and had harboured since I was a child a strong belief that I'd end up in living in America one day.

I missed my girlfriend and I missed my car, and even though she could be nasty and distant and careless with my feelings, and ended up leaving me a little while after I got back, and even though that car broke down on me over Christmas when I was at the coast — I was missing them so much at the time that they'll always be a part of this thing. Well, that *feeling* will.

I couldn't relate to the people I was living with, who were rich and seemed so young, and even though most of them were from Tennessee, they weren't nearly as country as I was — and that made me feel ashamed sometimes.

The courses the university had me doing were too easy, and by October, I could feel myself slipping into this thing I get — like I've fallen out of love with the world, and I want it to leave me alone.

For a while, since I knew it was really for a notion of the land that I had left home in the first place, I actively tried to like the town I was in. I'd go walking for hours, along Main Street and up and down the sidestreets there and I'd even walk through the autoyards sometimes. I'd walk in the suburbs and on the service roads and once, I walked about three hours towards Sevierville and back. I tried, but even though it was autumn, and the sunlight and the sky and the cottonwoods were truly beautiful for a whole month — none of it helped the feeling that things were going wrong.

This period was the first time in my life that drinking took a hold of me, the first time when I'd do it even when I promised myself not to. These days, of course, that compulsion to disappoint myself is a familiar thing, and I can watch for it. But at the time, that first time, it was like rapture — and it gave me a tragic feeling that I thought was adding heft and meaning to my days.

I drank every night in a tiny bar at the end of Main Street called Tumblin' Dice, except Sundays when it was closed and I'd drink in my room, or take a few into the woods with me and sit down in the

leaves and drink there. Tumblin' Dice had great live music on Wednesday and Saturday nights, and it was the only place in town where you were allowed to smoke inside. Early on, before the well was poisoned and especially when I'd go in the afternoons — and watch the men come in, sometimes still with coal on their faces, carrying their work boots and talking loudly in that songlike way I keep close in my memory — in the first few weeks of knowing Tumblin' Dice, I thought I'd found a grail.

I remember the whole of November had been cool, with cobalt skies and pitching sunlight. But that day, Wednesday the 30th, was the first day it'd snowed. It wasn't quite the first time I'd ever seen snow in my life — but it was the first time I'd ever seen it snow like that.

They told me three inches came down before lunch and I promise, it came down like hard rain — in sweeps because of the wind, so hard there were times when you could hear it landing.

I spent most of the day watching the snow from my window, and then at about five I left my room. It was clearing up and it was dark, and walking across campus my feet crunched on the grass and I could see icicles glinting on the dogwoods.

I went by one of my favourite places in town, a warehouse that was now a Baptist church, with a huge parking lot and an illuminated board out front the pastor would write terrifying things on — like BACKSLIDING STARTS WHEN KNEEBENDING STOPS. I went and stood in the parking lot and looked at it — the board, the pastor's handwriting, the squares of fluorescent light in the windows — and I strained to hear what they were singing inside, and I wondered like I always did about actually going in. I often think that if I'd known, standing there, that I was only going to be in the country for another four days, I'd have done it right then — and often I wonder if things would've gone differently for me, if I had.

I couldn't get onto Main Street at the Alcoa turnoff because they'd thrown salt all over the road, and the ditch near the guardrail where you climbed over was full of mud. I walked through a suburb and then down an alley that led between two lines of kit houses, and I found another alley that went up to Main.

I saw a van parked in front of a coffeeshop I'd been into a few times. The cargo door was open and there were three guys standing around looking into the back.

When I joined them, they were gesturing at a heap of tubes and cords and brackets, and one of them was saying "You're a ass if you think we can do it buzzed. We'll kill ourselves first."

I spoke to them, and it turned out they were there to hang Christmas lights on the front of the shop — except they had to wait till midnight to do it. There was a bylaw saying that light displays were only allowed to go up on December first, and had to be down by January tenth or something like that — which was a weird thing about Maryville, since there was so much to do with Christmas everywhere else. Even back in October, the Walmart had installed a bunch of Father Christmases, on little platforms with plastic trees and fake gifts all around them, and lots of people had strung tinsel up inside their cars — and for about a month already, no matter where you went or what you bought, they'd give you a candy cane with your change and tell you to have a Merry Christmas.

The owner of the coffeeshop was the uncle of one of the guys, apparently, and he was paying them double the usual rate to have the lights up before morning. I thought about asking them if they needed any help with it, when one of them said “Hey! You know what we could do, we could drag the shit upstairs *now*, then bake out while we waited for go-time.”

They were enthused, and started fetching things out the back of the van — but I wanted to drink, so I left them there and went on to Tumblin’ Dice.

Getting drunk felt just sort of usual, but the band that played that night was something special. They were called Kin, three brothers from Mississippi and their cousin — drums, bass, guitar and a Hammond organ — and it was the organ that did it. It’d be quiet in the verses and barely there in the choruses, but when it got a break it would just flood into the song and the sound would go everywhere, and lift you and make you feel like you were in a church. I danced on my own and with other people — it didn’t matter, everyone was dancing. I bought rounds and rounds of drinks for the musicians and they let me up on stage to hand them over between songs — and when their set was finished, I can’t explain it, but I was different.

I finished the drink I had and when I went outside it was snowing again, a light flurry, all of it staying in the air. My ears burned like they had current in them and I turned my collar up, and I got my gloves out of my pockets and put them on.

I saw the van still parked outside the coffeeshop, and I started walking in that direction. Two of the guys, Harlan and Steve, were leaning on the side of the van. When they saw me, Steve said “Hey man, stay for the show.”

It was five minutes before midnight, and I looked up at the balcony and even though the lights were off, I could imagine — and I told them please, just to wait for me. I went to a Texaco down the road and bought two twelve-packs, some cigarettes, and some stuff to eat.

When I got back to the van Ed was there, too. We opened the cargo door and climbed inside and started drinking the beers. We drank four or five each while we ate chips and peanuts and smoked some of the cigarettes — and it got warm in there, and we spoke easily with each other.

After a while it got too smoky inside, and someone said “Should we do it?” — and we climbed out into the freezing air. For some reason, Ed was going to be the guy to plug them in. The rest of us got to watch. We shouted “Three, two, one!” and they flashed on even brighter than I was ready for, the colours with an immense light in them — reindeer, a child wrapped in a white blanket. “Wait for it,” Harlan said — and suddenly, two blue angels appeared over the scene, and streaks of light ran toward the centre and crashed together to make a pulsing star. I could feel Steve’s arm around me and I heard him say “Hey now buddy, how’s that?” and I heard Harlan call out to Ed — and while I was looking up at the lights and the falling snow, I saw how the two were parts of each other and bits of something else, and I knew it was a real thing, and I said to myself right then that if I was still in America on Christmas day I’d be drunk and lonely, and I’d have ruined it forever.

YET TROUBLE CAME

After his phone alarm went off and dissolved the dream he was having — the first thing Carl knew, was that he'd been grinding his teeth again.

He put his feet on the floor and sat on the edge of the mattress, then reached for the cloth he kept next to the bed — soaking in a bucket of water there on the floor. He wrung the cloth out and then wrapped it around his jaw, and just held it there for a while. Then he felt for the coffee flask and the mug. Like the bucket and the cloth, they were always set out the night before. He drank two mugs of the lukewarm coffee while he sat on the edge of the bed, and woke up. His wife would never stir, but sometimes his daughter would. She'd sit up from her place in the bed and ask him when he'd be home, and sometimes he'd have to stroke her hair to get her to lie back down again.

He slept in all his work clothes except his shoes and his button shirt. These things waited for him in the hallway — along with his keys, cigarettes and a lighter, a coolerbag with two sandwiches in it, his car battery and a spanner.

After he'd connected up the battery and started the engine, unless it was raining, he'd usually smoke a cigarette in the road — just letting the car idle for a while. That morning, he walked to the abandoned lot on the corner of his street, and stared out at the harbour lights while he smoked.

Even though there were roadworks going on in Church Street, Carl was on the N1 by 6am. His alarm'd gone off at 5.40. This is how it went, six days a week — Carl chain-smoking in the car the whole way to Brackenfell to keep himself awake. Most mornings, he'd be there within half an hour. He'd park in the lot behind the massive Checkers and fetch the pillow and the sleeping bag he kept in the boot, and he'd lie down in the backseat and try to sleep until his alarm went off again at 6.55.

Carl worked at the 24 Hour Laundromat. That was its name — but actually, it was open from seven to seven, every day except Sundays. He worked for an old Korean woman who'd been in the country for seven years — a widow, with the worst hunchback he'd ever seen. She lived in a flat above the laundrette with her son and his family, and she'd only come downstairs twice a day. The first time was always to bring Carl some peeled fruit, and fetch the laundry that had come in with stains that he couldn't wash out himself — stuff that had grease on it, or blood, mustard, ink.

Being inside the little shop, with its windows painted in Korean flags and its 40-watt bulbs, was like being in a dark furnace when the tumble-driers were going — and every day, Carl went home

exhausted, with a feeling of dried sweat, and a damp smell on his skin. He'd see Mrs. Kim again in the evening, when he got paid. She'd come downstairs, usually just before seven o'clock, and give him his envelope. The envelope would have R300 inside it, and always, the same thing written across the front — *Thank you for your working from mrs Kim.*

That evening though, she was downstairs at least half an hour earlier than usual. Carl was still busy with the last bit of folding he had to do when he noticed she was around. Just the way she *looked*, made him feel uneasy. She was holding his envelope in both her hands and pulling at it — and she was muttering to herself in Korean. The envelope looked much thicker than normal.

After he was done with the folding, and he'd packed it all into plastic bags, and he'd unplugged the machines and turned off the lights at the back of the shop — Carl said to her, "What's wrong, Mrs. Kim?"

She pointed at him, and said "You" — and then waved the envelope and said, "Ah ni." Then she waved the envelope again and made an X with both her arms across her chest. She bowed her head after that and held out the envelope — then said "Sorry" when he took it.

Carl looked inside and it was way more than usual. It looked like about a thousand rand, in fifties and twenties. He knew exactly what was going on, but because he was angry about it, he pretended like he didn't for a full ten minutes — while the old woman did things like wave at him and say "Sorry, bye bye" — and point at herself, and mime like she was doing the washing and folding and working the till.

She started to cry when he tried to give her back some of the money from the envelope — and when she got his keys from him, still in tears, and unclipped the set she'd given him from the rest of the bunch — Carl gave it up, and just walked toward the door.

Out of habit, he turned off all the lights as he passed by the switch panel. Mrs. Kim whimpered when it went dark, then cried harder. Carl knew from powercuts how horrible it was in there with the lights off — totally black, in a way that made you feel like the geysers were humming inside your head. The whole way back to his car, he felt bad for not turning them back on for her before he left.



Carl got strange in the army.

He was one of those young men who'd got conscripted before they'd even had a taste of the world — then returned to it damaged, and different from how they were. He was in basic training for just three months before he wound up in Angola, in a reconnaissance party with four other nineteen-year-olds and their sergeant. Because they were terrified, they spent their days there hidden in the thickest bush they could find — smoking joints and playing silent games of cards, and taking turns sleeping —

But their nights, those were all spent on their stomachs, crawling through long grass and thornbushes where crickets screamed in their ears, in darkness that had no shape until something

would explode — and then everything would flash to life, everything as shadows in a red mist, like a glimpse of hell before the sound of the blast would find them in the dark, and set their ears ringing for hours. Sometimes, someone would lose their nerve and fire their rifle — and sometimes, bullets would fly back at them from the other side, coming screaming through the night, like bats on fire.

Those night-time scenes stayed with Carl for years, growing in sweep and detail until it was like he housed in his head a private collection of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. They messed with his sleeping and frayed his confidence — and it became difficult for him to talk normally to people, and he began to spend less and less of his time out of the house. He worried his parents, who put him on medication that made him sleepy all the time — bright yellow pills that came in a canister that said DO NOT OPERATE HEAVY MACHINERY on the label.

After a while on the pills, when Carl was sleeping through the night again and he wasn't crying as much — his dad sat him down, and told him it was time for him to move out of the house. He gave Carl the keys to the Fox, and a cheque for two thousand rand to help him find a place to rent.

Carl moved to Woodstock — and then about a month later, he met Malinke at trauma counselling.

The doctor who'd given him his pills'd explained to Carl that he could get them for free, so long as he went down to the refuge in Salt River and did one of the courses they ran there. He'd been a few times already — but that day, was Malinke's first. She showed up late, and breathless — with suitcases in her hands, and a bloody piece of cottonwool in her mouth. She was tall and thin, and she had bruises on her face that her make-up couldn't hide, and bruises on her arms, and the saddest kind of blue eyes — but still, she was beautiful to Carl, and in a way he seemed to feel in his blood. She twisted and curled her dark hair around her fingers all the time, and she barely spoke — but her voice was high and sweet when she did. That first day, she'd got partnered up with Carl while they had to do some drawing with crayons, and he'd found out she didn't hear that well anymore — and actually *liked* it when he was just quiet.

Even though it wasn't something he'd ever felt before, Carl knew he loved her, from that first day — and when she mentioned that she hadn't thought of a place to stay yet, she was probably just going to ask them for a few nights at the refuge — he said she should come and see the spare room he had in his cottage in Woodstock, instead. While they drove there together, he told her it wasn't much of a place, and it was basically all his allowance from the army'd pay for — but that he'd put some work into it that he was actually quite proud of already, caulking and painting, and hanging things, and cutting kilograms of ivy and bougainvillea away from the windows, and how there used to be a bad leak under the sink in the kitchen, but he'd fixed it. He told her that some times, like when the afternoon sun was in the place, especially — he promised her, it actually felt *nice* in there, like a proper home.

In the beginning, she stayed in her room a lot. Three or four times a day, Carl'd hear her lock the door on her way back in from the kitchen or the lounge, then collapse on the blow-up mattress, and cry — or else just read out loud from her bible. From what he could tell, that was all she did in there,

and after three days he went out and bought her a little radio-cassette player and some tapes — just so he didn't have to hear her, if she didn't want him to.

Slowly, she began to spend more time with him. Mainly in the evenings, after supper, when they'd sit in the lounge and watch the news together, then usually a few programs that came after the news as well. And even though Carl was still sure he loved her, it wasn't in his nature anymore to expect anything of it — for him, really, it was more than enough the way it was, just for her to be there at all — and they went on for weeks in the same way, while the bruises on her face faded, and Carl began to feel, for the first time in years, like he was getting back in touch.

And then — on the evening he arrived home from his last counselling session — he found her in the kitchen, in front of the stove. After weeks of only seeing her in pyjamas, the dress she had on stung his heart. She had her radio in there with her — and she was playing one of her tapes, very loud. For a while, he just stood in the doorway and watched her at the stove, thinking he'd never been in a kitchen that smelled so good. When she looked up and saw him, he saw her take a deep breath — and then she turned off the radio. She walked up to him and put her hands on his shoulders, and then she kissed him. Her hands moved slowly up to his face, and he could feel her fingers touching him around his eyes and on his nose — and her eyes were open the whole time, looking at him. When the kiss was over, she put her hands back on his shoulders, and she looked at him again — and the first thing she said was "You're never going to hit me, hey?"

They were married at a magistrate's court a few days later. Neither of them wanted anyone they knew to be present, so a lady that worked there had to witness it. Malinke asked Carl, instead of a ring, to give her a silver crucifix on a piece of leather to hang around her neck — and they went to a shop in Milnerton and chose it together. That night was the first night Carl'd ever shared a bed with a woman — and they didn't end up making love, they ended up just lying there, and holding each other, and promising each other things about the way their life was going to be. They said they both had things they'd never talk about, and that they wanted it that way — and they promised each other they'd always look forward, at what was coming, and not at the stuff behind them anymore.

Two years later, Malinke fell pregnant. Their daughter, Temara, was born in a way where you just thought she was quiet, maybe even just happier than other babies — until she was two, and then all of a sudden the doctors started saying she was behind, way behind, and that she couldn't do all these things she was supposed to be able to. They said she needed occupational therapy and special education — but work was always hard for Carl to come by, and even harder to keep — and so Temara went without those things, and instead, has just spent all twelve years of her life at home, by her mother's side.

Through the years, there were some bad months, and some really bad months — but working at the laundrette, Carl'd got himself into a position where, so long as Malinke worked it out for him — he could shuffle his debts around, and never get into too much trouble with anyone anymore. There was never anything left over, but his family ate food they liked, and they had enough clothes and a tv and he still had his Fox, and it still ran okay — and Malinke took care of Temara, better than any nurse in

the world — and even though Carl knew that their life was really just about keeping wolves from the door, every day, when he got his envelope, he felt happy, and proud to be doing it.

But now, just like that — the laundrette job was gone.

His life was sewn up in that money, and now it was gone, and while Carl drove home from Brackenfell, his thoughts in tatters, just watching the catseyes on the highway to make sure he kept the car going straight, knowing that the next day, he had to go back out into the world again and try find another way to fit — as the sun sank lower, a heavy feeling he knew so well came back to him — and settled there on his heart, like a great bird come home to roost.



Carl said nothing about it to his family when he got home. He showered and then they ate supper together, he made his sandwiches and filled his coffee flask — and then the next morning he woke up with his alarm, just like everything was normal.

After he'd hooked up the battery, started the Fox and had his smoke, Carl drove out on the N1 to a petrol station he liked — a Caltex near the turnoff to Philadelphia, with a massive shop and a restaurant that served coffee in 500ml cups. The whole way in the car, he massaged his jaw and worried about his teeth — they all felt loose in his gums that morning.

It was still so dark you couldn't see the mountains when he got there. He went into the shop, and bought an exam pad and a three-pack of Bic pens. He ordered some coffee, and went and sat at one of the picnic tables they had outside.

He drank the coffee and smoked, while he watched the cars on the highway, and waited for it to get light enough to write by. The tables were behind a line of gum trees that grew along the shoulder of the road, and when cars went by the trees got backlit, and big shadows washed across the tables. As soon as he could see well enough, he began to write out his CV — listing everything he'd ever done, even if it'd only lasted a day or two.

He filled eight sides of paper, then read it over twice. He wished he had something there to help him check his spelling. When it was nearly eight o'clock, he went and got in the car, and started heading back to Cape Town.

Just under those massive flyovers outside Bellville, he got caught badly in traffic — and while he crawled his way back into the city, Carl thought about what his tactics were going to be. He knew he probably wouldn't find a job that paid like Mrs. Kim had — but he figured that if he found something in Woodstock, then at least he'd be saving on petrol. It took him about an hour to get back to Brickfield Road. He parked the car, and put his button shirt on, and ran his electric shaver over his face. Then he got out the car, and started walking down towards Main.

He sat for a while on some steps outside a building, and smoked a cigarette. He read his CV again and he realised that, apart from the good ones, there weren't actually that many jobs he hadn't tried

before — and he couldn't tell if that made him feel more hopeful, or more worried. He smoked another cigarette, and then stood up, and walked down the road.

He saw the first place from across the street. Its roof was covered in pigeons, most of them grey and white, but glowing in the sun, so they actually looked like doves — and the very white ones, theirs even looked like *angel*-wings, in the sun — and Carl was sure it must've been a sign. While he crossed the street, between traffic, he read what it said on the window — Mike N Sons Internet N Haircut.

As soon as he opened the door, a very cool-looking guy standing behind the counter just said, "Still closed." He was wearing a white vest, and sunglasses with gold lenses.

"No, I'm actually looking for a job, hey," Carl said. "I have a CV with me."

"Do you know about IT?" the guy asked. He had a voice, and an accent, that made his English sound like birdsong.

"What's that?" Carl said.

"Do you know about computers?"

"I know where the plugs go. I've done that before."

"Then you must be a hair dresser."

"I could be," Carl said. "I can learn how."

"My friend," the guy said — and then looked at Carl, and shook his head, and smiled. "I think you are in the wrong place."

"Ja, maybe," Carl said. He looked around, and noticed how bright and clean it was inside. Even the tiles on the floor were nice — they were cream, with big green, black or yellow dots in the middle. He heard the pigeons scratching on the roof outside, then he said, "You're not keen to get some washing machines in here, hey? In the back there. It's good money. Seriously. And I could run them for you. I do that well."

"There are lots of those places along this road. Too many of those places."

"Oh, okay. Ja. Well thanks, anyway," Carl said — then left the shop.

He tried every laundrette he could find, down both sides of Victoria Road and along the side-streets as well — but they were all self-service, or else it was a family that owned the place, and they didn't need any help. On his way back up the road, he stopped at all the superettes. He bought a ginger beer at the last one he tried because they were on special — and then decided to go back to Mike N Sons to drink it.

When he went in again, the first guy had company. Another guy, also wearing sunglasses, and a soccer shirt, was sitting at a computer behind the counter. They'd been talking in a different, beautiful language to each other — but they broke off when they heard the door and saw Carl standing there.

"Ah, my friend," the guy with the gold shades said. "Did you find any luck?"

"Not really," Carl said. "Those laundromats are all do it yourself things, man."

"Oh, that is too bad. Too bad for you."

"Ja, I know," Carl said. "Listen, can I sit here for a while and drink this? I'm pretty tired, and I haven't really had breakfast."

"Who is this guy?" the other said. His sunglasses had dark blue lenses.

"Sorry, I'm Carl. Your friend is going to give me a job here just now," Carl said — then laughed, and went and sat down on one of the barber chairs by the window.

"He should come and work for me," the guy at the computer said. Both of them laughed.

"Why, what do you do?" Carl asked.

The first guy said, "He has a nightclub."

"Ja, which one?"

"It is called Dreams. Right heah. On this road."

"What would I do?" Carl asked.

"You would be the bouncer."

"Really?"

"Yes, you stop the people when they fight," he said — and then he put one of his hands over his mouth. "And you check them at the door. You take their bottles, and their drugs, you take them away," he said — and then all of a sudden, they were both laughing.

"Are you teasing me?" Carl said.

"Yes, I am sorry. It's only," he said — then started fighting with his breath — "They'll kill you there! Ha! Soon! Very soon," he said — and fell onto his friend, who hugged him back. Both of them laughed so much, they had to take off their sunglasses and wipe their eyes.

Carl joined in and laughed with them. When it died out, he spoke to them for a while about what they thought it would be like to work down at the harbour. They both said they knew people who were doing it — and that it was shitter than most things you could do.

"I like ships, though," Carl said.

The guy with the blue lenses said, "Work there — then see if you do."

When Carl was nearly finished his ginger beer, he stood up and said "Okay. Here's a sip left for you two. I'm going to try a couple more places. Wish me luck."

"Yes, yes," the guy in the blue shades said. "Good luck to you, brother."

Carl walked the other way down the street for a block, and found a used car lot that was advertising jobs. It was going fine until Wendy, the main lady there, told him he'd get paid on commission. He'd worked like that before, selling locks and chains for garbage bins — he'd gone door-to-door for a month, and made nearly nothing — and he said to Wendy, after she'd finished showing him around the lot, "Actually, I don't think I'm that much of a salesman. Sorry. You have nice cars here, though," he said — and turned around and crossed the street, before she had a chance to say anything back.

He thought he'd just go home. He pictured himself telling Malinke. Temara would probably be in the room, but she'd just be happy he was there at all. He knew he'd have to talk loudly, so Malinke heard him the first time — because he knew if he had to say it twice, that's when he'd cry about it himself, for sure. He knew Malinke would cry, maybe for hours, and probably read her bible out loud — but he also knew that after all that, they'd lie together in bed, probably for the rest of the day — and

that that was probably the only thing that was going to make him feel better about anything, anyway.

He was about to cross the street again, and walk back to the car, when he had the idea to stop and get a Cape Ads. He went into a grocers that had a 70-year-old security guard stationed outside — with a fat, cute rottweiler chained to his chair.

Carl had never been into Faizel's before, but he liked it right away. It smelled like baking inside, and there was a big skylight, so the lights weren't harsh like those tubes normally are, and half of the place was just rows of fresh vegetables and fruit, and spices and herbs that all looked good. And there were tvs — three big screens that were set up so you could watch from no matter where you were in the shop.

Carl went right up to a guy sitting in a high chair behind the counter. Carl could tell it was his place — he looked like a king the way he sat up there, looking out at his things over the heads of the ladies who stood and worked the tills in front of him.

It turned out they had space for Carl. The owner, Mr. Faizel, didn't even ask to see his CV. He just said, "It's your lucky day, Mr. Carl. It's nearly springtime now and we're always needing help with the trucks. They come in all day with the stuff, you must take it nicely down and put it nicely in the back. None of this horseplaying. When the stuff don't look nice, people never buy."

"I'm very responsible," Carl said. "Can I ask about pay?"

Faizel tapped his finger on the counter a few times, and leaned forward and stared hard and Carl — saying, "Here, you work for free." He held the stare for about five seconds, and then his face creased everywhere, and Carl realised he'd been teasing him. They both laughed.

"No, no, no," Faizel said. "But I got you! Oh, too much. No Mr. Carl, here we pay a hundred rands a day — plus a nice box of vegetables for you to take home."

"How big's the box?"

"About sixty rands big."

"Okay," Carl said.

"Does it sound good?"

"Ja, I'm thinking," Carl said. "What's three hundred minus sixty minus, what, like another sixty for petrol?"

Faizel blinked a few times — then said "Sorry, your pardon?"

"Never mind, I think it's fine. What'll my hours be?"

"You must be here eight in the morning and stay until the last truck has gone. It's hard to say *when* that is — sometimes it's five, sometimes seven, and we have to do it in the dark. But on Saturday, I promise you, you will finish at one o'clock."

"And Sundays?"

"Sundays are your days. No trucks on Sundays."

"Ja, that's great. Can I start now?" Carl said.

And then a horrible thing happened.

Mr. Faizel'd told one of the cashier ladies to take him through to the back, and he'd met Elvis his

supervisor there, and they'd smoked a cigarette together — and Elvis'd told him that it was a slow day, but if Carl *wanted* something to do, he could take some stuff through to the floor, and shelve it.

Carl was standing next to a box full of bananas, grabbing them out and arranging them nicely in a bin near the front of the shop — when he heard Malinke say, “Carl? What are you doing?”

“Oh flip, Linkie,” Carl said. “Is *this* where you shop? Oh, hello Marie-biscuit! How's my girl?”

Malinke started to cry, and then Temara started as well — so Carl walked them the wrong way through the turnstile, and straight out the front door of the shop. He started speaking to his wife when they got onto the street, even though he knew it was too loud, and too windy out there for her to hear him properly. When it seemed like she just wasn't going to stop crying, Carl went back inside and said to Mr. Faizel, “I think I have to go home now quickly. But I'll come back.”

“Yes yes, that's fine,” Faizel said.

“And if I don't come back, it's not your fault,” Carl said — and then left.

After they'd got home, and he'd managed to tell Malinke everything, and everyone'd calmed down — Malinke made some tea and sat with Carl, and showed him with a calculator why they couldn't afford for him to work at Faizel's.

“But,” Carl said — and he put his arm around Malinke, and kissed her softly on the neck. “Come on. Not bad for day one, at least. Hey?”



The next morning, Carl went out early and bought a Cape Ads. He sat with it for an hour in the lounge — with a pen in his hand, and his CV next to him on the couch. He read every advert in the paper and only drew a ring around two of them. One was for farrier-work — and after he'd looked up in Malinke's dictionary what that was, he put a big X over the ring he'd drawn. The other advert was for salespeople, no experience required — but there was no answer when he called the number they'd given. He tried it at least ten times, but it just rang and rang.

He went back through to the bedroom. It looked like Malinke was asleep, on her side, with her head turned away from him. Temara was sitting up in bed, just staring down at Malinke. Carl wanted so badly just to get back into bed — but instead he shook Malinke, and said “Linkie, please, wake up.”

She jerked around and said, “I'm awake Carl, what's wrong?”

“There's nothing in the paper. One thing, but there's no answer when I call.”

“What's the time?” she asked.

“I don't know, half-seven maybe.”

“Well, they're probably not at work yet, love.”

“Oh, flip. Right,” Carl said, and laughed. “Jeez, I'm stupid sometimes hey.” Malinke laughed sweetly. Temara snapped out of her staring, and joined in.

“Carl,” Malinke said. “I've been thinking.”

"Take two Dispirin, the pain will go away," Carl said. It was a family joke, and they all laughed at it.

Malinke said "No Carl, but seriously. Think about it. This whole time who've you been working for? People like us. They have babies, or get in a accident, and all of a sudden they can't afford you anymore."

"Sometimes it's my fault though," Carl said.

"What about that car wash place that closed down? How was that your fault? Or how did you mess up at the laundrette now?"

"Ja, okay. Sorry."

"What I'm saying is, you should get your money from rich people. People who don't even notice it's going — or that it's *you* it's going to."

"Ja, how though?" Carl said.

Malinke said, "Why don't you try working in town again?"

The last time Carl'd worked in the city, it'd been in the days when telling people he was just back from the army'd been a helpful thing to do. A jeweller on the corner of Long and Hout had hired him — mainly to polish things, but also to keep an eye on people when there were lots of them in the shop at the same time. One day, the place was busy — and a woman Carl recognised from tv came in. He knew her from the news or from a soap opera, one of the two — and he just couldn't stop staring. After a while, he saw, she noticed he was staring, and she gave him a look that meant something — and then he saw her put a watch in her purse — and then she walked straight past him, and out onto the street. He couldn't move to chase her, he just stood there until the shop'd emptied again — and then he went over to his boss, and tried to tell him what'd happened. He said he was sorry and he tried really hard to explain how it'd felt for him to see someone like her — how things'd seemed to slow down, and get so *thick*, it didn't feel real, it felt like it was all a dream. In the end, Carl traded the three weeks' pay he was owed — just for his boss not to call the police on anybody.

Since then, Carl'd hedged himself so willingly and completely in between their house and the jobs he'd tried to keep, that he'd managed to keep the city at a distance — for him, it *lay* there, apart — this mysterious, scary thing, with its cannon-blast every day at noon, and the way it dressed up every night, in millions of lights. "Ja, maybe," he said.

"Mm-mmm — I know that means No, when you say it like that," Malinke said. "Just like you did yesterday, please, just go up and down with your CV in town, and just *see* if there's anything. Please."

"Ja, okay. But —"

"Just come back with something," Malinke said. She took Carl's hand, and smiled tightly. Her eyes were shining, and she was nodding her head while she talked. "Anything for now, Carl. I know you can do it."

"Can we come with?" Temara said.

Carl said "No. There's no ways, my darling. Sorry."

He hated driving on Main Road, so he tried to loop through Zonnebloem on his way into the city.

He took a turn too early, and ended up on Darling Street at half-past eight. It was loud and gridlocked, and full of people trying to cross anywhere they could — and to Carl, it felt like driving in a movie where something really bad happens, like a bomb or a volcano, and everyone's trying to get out at the same time. By accident, he ran a red light because he was worrying about a taxi in his rearview — and he nearly hit a woman carrying a sack of maize meal on her head.

He parked in Adderley Street in an unmetred bay, and then smoked two cigarettes in the car to get himself steady. Finally, when he felt his heart come down a bit, he got his CV out the cubbyhole and checked his face in the rearview — then got out and locked the car, and walked up to Long Street.

In the city, even though the sky was clear and the tops of the buildings were dazzling, the streets were shady — and cold enough for his breath to make mist in the air. He looked up and down the street, and saw that most places were still opening up. There were people with mops and steaming buckets of water outside the restaurants, soaping the pavement. There were people setting up stalls that sold sunglasses, and Nigerian movies, and cigarettes and sweets. Carl decided to walk down toward the foreshore, and then work his way back up.

He crossed the street because he could tell that the sunlight was going to fall the other side first — and after fifteen minutes, he had it warm on his back. He walked slowly down to Lower Long — getting fascinated by the datestones on the buildings he saw, wondering if they all had their U's written like V's, soon crossing and recrossing the street just to check them all, and wishing he knew how the roman numerals worked. On a dusty wall outside a gallery, he wrote CARL ERASMVS MCXVIIVC with his finger, and then rubbed it out.

When he got nearly to the end of Lower Long, the stone buildings died off, and a shadowline appeared ahead of him. No sun filtered down to the street where the bank buildings were — all of a sudden, you had to strain to see people clearly, and the robots stood out like it was night-time.

He crossed the street again and started heading back up the other way, stopping at all the places he'd heard of before — Discom, Bears, Ellerines, Clicks. They all had enough staff already — plus, he knew, they weren't really the kind of places Malinke'd been talking about. Most of the restaurants, and some of the nice shops he went into, he just walked straight back out of again. He avoided all the jewellers — and all the windows in the clothes stores were filled with things he couldn't imagine being able to sell to anyone. Mainly, he tried the places that were obviously in decline — places that had no one inside them, and sun-bleached posters in the windows.

He managed to speak to a few people — but when the last of them just looked at his CV and said, "Go get this typed out and bring it back later", Carl got a little unmoored from the mission — and went to find somewhere to sit and smoke and eat something.

He bought a sandwich at a café, and then chose an alley that led down between an Adult World and an Irish pub. There were garbage skips in the alley, standing in puddles of water that reflected the sky. Beyond the skips was a beautiful blue wall, and then a night club, closed and locked up — with a high chair bolted to the ground near the front door. Carl went and sat in the chair.

While he ate his sandwich, a guy with thick dreadlocks and a woollen cap came out of the door in

the cobalt wall. Carl noticed then that the place was probably going to be a shop — all the windows frames'd been varnished, and the glass had that paper behind it, that told you renovations were happening inside.

The guy who'd come out the door went back in and fetched a ladder. He propped the ladder against the wall, and squinted up at the sun — then took his arms out of his overalls, and folded the overalls down to his waist. Carl read what it said on his t-shirt but he didn't get what it was supposed to mean. Carl watched the guy sling a bag over his shoulder and climb the ladder. When he'd climbed up above the windows, the guy hung the bag on the top rung and unzipped it. Out of the bag, he got a long pencil, and a steel hoop with sheets of clacking plastic hanging on it. After a while, Carl saw that the plastic sheets were actually stencils.

The guy worked quickly with the stencils — in the time it took Carl to smoke two cigarettes, he'd already moved the ladder twice, about a metre across each time. Every now and then he'd sharpen the pencil, and Carl would see the shavings falling like goldflakes into the alley. When he was finished with the stencilling, the guy put the hoop back into the bag. Then he climbed down the ladder and went into the shop.

Carl was about to get up and go and look, when he saw the guy stick his head out the door, and light a little pipe he had cupped in his hands. He blew one, long jet of smoke into the air — all of it disappearing before it got out of the alley. He put the pipe away in his pocket, then came out and moved the ladder back across to where he'd started with the stencilling. Carl figured he was going to start painting — but instead, he climbed higher than he'd gone the first time, and got more pencils out of the bag at the top of the ladder.

And then the guy started to draw. Straight onto the wall. He was leaning close, and he had his tongue sticking out the bottom corner of his mouth — like Temara always did, when she drew. He made big strokes that you could see crumbled the ends of his pencils, and then small, quick strokes, that sometimes he practiced in the air before doing on the wall.

Carl got up and went over to look. The guy said, "Oraait, chief" when he noticed Carl at the bottom of the ladder. Carl watched, helping the guy move the ladder, even putting his foot on the bottom rung to keep it steady for him while he drew. From where he was, it was hard to see what the guy was drawing — but he could smell the pencils working, and it felt nice to be working in the sun. After about half an hour, the guy came down and said to Carl, "Oraait, thanks chief. Do you want to look before I paint?"

"Ja, definitely. But can you stand on the ladder for me?"

"A moment," the guy said, and ducked inside the shop. When he came back out, his pipe was in his hands again.

"I'm Carl, by the way."

"I am Hlumelo," the guy said.

While they shook hands, Carl practiced saying the name.

"Very good," Hlumelo said. "Go and see now."

"That's dagga, hey? In your pipe. Are you just going to smoke it out here?"

"That is my idea."

"Jeez, nice," Carl said. "Rock and roll."

"Do you want some?"

"No, that stuff makes me crazy. You go for it, though. And stand on the ladder here, hey — please." While Carl climbed, he heard and then smelt Hlumelo's pipe. He laughed and said "Rock and roll" over his shoulder.

The first thing he saw on the wall was the flames. They came up from the tops of the windows, and they had points like candles. Above the flames were the words GATES OF ZION HEADSHOP — and lying on top of the words was a thing like a lion, except it had a mane of fire, and a dragon's tail. In the spaces everywhere else on the wall, there were sun patterns, and star patterns — and one big crescent moon.

"Jeez," Carl called down from the top of the ladder. "This is great. You have to tell me what the colours are going to be."

"Why don't you stay and see?"

Carl climbed down the ladder. "Are you going to paint *now*?" he asked.

"I have to. In case it rains."

"Ja. Where's the paints?" Carl said.

For nearly two hours, Carl went up and down the ladder to fetch and carry the paints for Hlumelo. They came in different sizes — there was a litre of orange, a litre of gold, and a litre each of lime green and bright purple for the lettering, and then smaller cans of turquoise, red, silver and midnight blue. About halfway through, Carl got into trouble for opening all the cans at the same time, to try choose his favourite colour. "Hayi man, it's dirty in the street," Hlumelo'd said.

By the time they were finished, half the alleyway was in shadow — and the noise from the traffic on Long Street was so bad, Carl thought he could feel it in the walls around them. They stood together, Carl smoking a cigarette, and looked at the shop.

"The thing is, even though it's getting kak in here — it doesn't ruin it," Carl said. "It's like it's its own thing, still."

Hlumelo laughed, and said thank you.

"No, really," Carl said. "If you just look straight at it, you know, like never mind everything else — you could be anywhere in the world."

"It is my art," Hlumelo said.

"Ja, exactly."

"But now, it is time for home," Hlumelo said. "No more art today." He put his hand in his pocket, and brought out a R50 note. "For your help, chief."

"No, man," Carl said.

"Serious."

"I'm also serious. Watching you was like a treat for me."

"But I must give you something," Hlumelo said.

"Well, tell me how to do it."

Hlumelo laughed and said, "What do you mean?"

"Tell me how *I* can do what you do. Like where do you get the stencils from?"

"I made them."

"Is it? Wow. Was it difficult?"

"No."

"Okay, great. And the drawing? How do you know what to draw? And the colours, as well.

Who tells you what colours to make it?"

"They are in my head," Hlumelo said.

"Ja, *now* they are — but did you do like a course or something in the beginning?"

"No."

"So you just practiced drawing that lion thing at home, until you could draw it on buildings?"

"Yes, but every time it is different. Shops must never look the same."

Carl felt gutted when Hlumelo said that — it was like a spell'd been broken. He went quiet for a while, then finally said "Shit. Actually, I don't think I'd be able to."

"You must see it and then you must practice," Hlumelo said. "It is the same for everyone."

"Does the — help?" Carl said, miming the way Hlumelo smoked his pipe.

"Me, I am rasta. It is just normal for me."

"Shit," Carl said — and lit a cigarette, and looked at the shop again. "I just don't think I'd be able to. Even though I want to, you know? What a kak thing to say about yourself, hey? But I don't, I really don't."

Hlumelo said, "When I was a boy, I wanted to be a farmer. But I am too lazy for that."

They said goodbye shortly afterwards — and when Carl exited the alley, it was after five o'clock, and Long Street was seething. You could smell exhaust fume in the air, and there were so many people on the pavements, no one could walk properly. Carl joined the crush of people and headed back towards his car — moving in stutters, like he had chains on his ankles.

He thought it would get better the further on he went, but already there were people drinking outside the bars, and people eating at tables right on the street — and at times, everyone just had to stop moving, and wait until the crowd up ahead'd formed itself into some kind of line they could follow. At one point, Carl felt a hand go into his pocket and slip out again. He checked — and thanked God it'd missed everything — and from there, walked on with his own hands in his pockets.

Even though he didn't know exactly where he was, he went down the next side-street he came abreast of. It led all the way down to Queen Elizabeth — where just as many people were walking, all in the same direction, that same feeling of exodus — and it was actually worse down there, because people were walking in the road and the cars were going faster, and the drivers were just leaning on their hooters, like that was all they were going to do about it. Carl was sure someone was going to get hit.

As he shuffled along, the buildings around him darkened window-by-window, and began to loom over the street like haunted mansions. The streetlights came on, and put out a campfiery light that made everyone, even guys in suits, even old women, look dangerous. The noise — people shouting, car hooters, buses and trucks, a helicopter, sirens — made one of Carl's ears block a little, and when it came time to cross streets his nerve left him, and he kept finding himself stranded on the pavement for minutes, just watching others dance through the crawling headlights, join the crowd on the other side of the road, and then disappear up the darkening street ahead. On the corner of Adderley and Bureau, blocked from crossing even though the green man was on because there was a limo in the intersection, and a crowd had gathered to try see inside — Carl felt utterly bewildered, and more like a countrymouse than ever before in his whole life.

He got to his car about a quarter of an hour later, and unlocked the door and climbed inside. He put a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it, then started the engine. As soon as he put his lights on and got the Fox in gear, a car guard appeared — leaning with his hands on the bonnet, and smiling.

Carl rolled down his window. "Jeez, be careful man!" he said.

"Seventy rand," the guy said, and put his machine inside the car so Carl could look.

"*Seventy* rand?"

"Yes, it is ten rands for one hour."

"Wow. I don't think I have that much with me."

"You must pay," the guy said.

"No man, that's ridiculous. *Seventy* rand?"

"If you give me fifty, you can go."

"I don't even have that," Carl said. He took his wallet out of his trousers, and opened it up. "See? There's just thirty."

"Hayi, man."

"I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Give me thirty, and leave your car. I watch it tonight. Then you come back when no one is working."

Carl gave him the money, then turned off the engine and the lights.

The car guard said, "Get out, buddy. I am waiting."

Walking out of the city, away from the buildings, was at least brighter because behind you was the bottom of the sky — whiteblue, above the golden ridge on the mountain. The noise, the traffic, the people only began to thin out halfway down Darling — when everyone flooded into the square that gave way onto the taxi rank. The square sounded like a million hornets in a bottle — but after five more minutes of walking, Carl had the pavement nearly to himself again. He quickened his pace, and checked around him every twenty steps or so. The streetlights hadn't come on yet along Darling, and he could see his shadow before him as he walked — very faint and about a kilometre long, and most of it just his legs.

When he got to the corner of Darling and Sir Lowry, he saw that traffic was backed up — badly,

the cars so still it was like they were in a photograph. He started to walk down Sir Lowry, but then he saw the streetlights weren't on yet there, either — and he saw some scary-looking bridges up ahead past the Good Hope Centre, so he turned around.

When he got back to the corner, behind the gridlock, Carl found himself in the last of the day's light. It was like a lamp was on in the corner of a room filled with smoke. Across the road, in the crook of the intersection where Darling goes up to Keizersgracht — in that small grove there, Carl saw about twenty grey figures, mainly sitting down. Behind them was a white building — and beyond that, Carl saw the lights were on in District Six.

As he crossed the street, he got a good view of the grove. In the shadows, he could make out about half of some of the men's faces that were sitting there — and he tried to make eye contact with them, but they were staring far off. He noticed a sign then, staked in the ground in front of the building. He could barely see it, but there were just two words written there, in big letters on a white background — MEN HERE. It freaked him out, the sign, and he was about to just run up the street until he got to the mosque on Keizergracht — when he was sure he saw Alfie Stevens, sitting right there under a tree.

He looked, and then looked again. The guy under the tree got up, and started coming towards him.

"Carl? Fuck man, it's you!"

"No ways — Alfie. Howzit?" They hugged each other. Carl could smell sweat in Alfie's hair.

Now that it was confirmed, Carl looked at Alfie — and actually wondered what it was he'd recognised about him in the first place. He'd known him for just two months, during basic training — and that was sixteen years ago. Alfie'd been a short guy, with wide shoulders, a big nose, and watery blue eyes. Now, he was slight, and his skin was red and raw, and his nose was huge and purple, and he had a grey-and-ginger beard and his eyes were veined, in a way that made them look more red than blue. He still looked like a gnome, Carl thought — like he used to — but maybe just more like a devil gnome, these days.

"What you doing here?" Alfie said.

"I live here, in Woodstock. Earl Street."

"Is it?"

"Ja, I've been here twelve years already," Carl said.

"Nice place?"

"I like it. I need to cut the ivy again, and now the bath leaks a bit — but ja, it's quite nice, actually."

"Your place?"

"No, we rent still."

"Uh, listen" Alfie said — and the way he scratched in his beard, and looked around and then back into Carl's eyes, reminded Carl of something. Alfie'd always had a way of seeming like your sadder older brother. He'd been the kind of guy to sneak liquor into base camp and then only drink it with

other people — and then talk so much when he was drunk that you almost regretted it. Carl remembered that the first time he'd ever been drunk, it was with Alfie — at midday, in a ditch somewhere in some veldt north of Pretoria.

"How you doing, you know, for scratch?" Alfie asked.

"Oh, shit Alfie. Wrong time man, I'm sorry. I just had to leave my car back in town because I couldn't pay the car guard."

"No, man! I'm not *asking* you for money," Alfie said — and smiled, showing gaps in his teeth. "What I'm saying is, why don't you let me stay with you? I've been staying with this guy — like my business partner — and he's the nicest guy in the world, but he can't have me there anymore."

Carl was quiet, so Alfie went on. "I can pay. Shit, I can pay, bru. Let me tell you. This," he said — and made a gesture at the clothes he was wearing — "Don't judge this. I can look right, Carl. Fuck, I'll tell you. I'm on the up, china."

"Then what you doing here, like this?" Carl said. "It's like a nightmare, this place."

"We're all just sitting, man. Just waiting for traffic to move again. Why sit still in a taxi when you can sit still on the grass?"

"Ja, I suppose," Carl said.

"Listen, china — how does two grand a month get you? Hey? I can pay it. Easy. And I'll pitch in for food and toilet paper, and whatever."

"And electricity and water."

"Ja, fine," Alfie said.

Carl remembered what Malinke had said to him that morning — *Just come back with something*. He looked at Alfie, then tried to do a sum in his head. He wasn't sure, but he felt like with an extra two thousand coming in, he could work at Faizel's — and everything'd be okay again.

"Let me think about it," Carl said.

Alfie said, "Let me come see the place."

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I have to walk, for one thing. It's quite far."

"I don't mind."

"But you don't have any stuff," Carl said.

"It's all at my friend's place. He's also in Woodstock. I can get it anytime."

Carl didn't know what to do. It wasn't even that he didn't know how he felt about it — he just didn't know what the right thing was. It flashed through his mind that the bed in Temara's room was always empty, anyway — and he said, "Ja, okay. Come see the place. You can meet my family, and we can all talk about it. I'm not promising anything though, hey?"

While they walked together down dark, loud Victoria Road — Alfie assuring Carl that it'd be fine, that no one'd give them any trouble under the bridges — they talked a bit about Carl's house.

"Do you have a garden?" Alfie said.

“Ag, some grass, and a bush or two — it’s tiny, though.”

“A pool?”

Carl laughed, and said “No ways.”

“Any pets?”

“We got a cat last year, for my daughter. But then she was hugging it one day, and it died. Just like that — in her arms.”

“Jesus.”

“Ja, well, my daughter’s a bit... You’ll see. Just be nice around her, please.”

“I’m always nice,” Alfie said.

“Well, I mean — be *super*-nice around her. Please.”



After nearly three weeks, Alfie hadn’t paid them a thing — and Malinke finally said something. Carl’s family’d got into the habit of waking up and just staying in bed, and waiting for Alfie to get up and out of the house before they did anything themselves. They were lying in bed — Temara was between them, asleep, with her shirt off, and both of them were tickling her back. Malinke whispered, “Carl, this isn’t right anymore.”

At the beginning of the month, the price of cigarettes’d gone up to over twenty bucks a pack, and so Carl hadn’t had one for two days. He hadn’t been irritable, except for one time with Temara — but he’d been grinding his teeth in his sleep badly again, and he’d been feeling tired and run-down, and like all life did was test you and test you. He’d been having a good morning — but the way Malinke’d whispered then, put a knot in his heart. “What do you mean?” he said — and right then, they heard Alfie bang some pots in the kitchen. Then Alfie started to whistle a tune, that broke off into a coughing fit.

“He lied to us, this isn’t right.”

“How did he lie?”

“Has he paid you anything yet?”

“Well,” Carl said. “Maybe he’s waiting for the end of the month. We do that, also.”

“But Carl, what makes you think he’ll have anything for us, even then? Open your eyes, love. Have you smelt Marie’s room lately?” Malinke said. After only about a week of Alfie living in it, the room’d taken on a combination odour of gin and piss. When Alfie was out, Malinke opened the windows and burned incense in there — but it never really helped.

“Okay, I’ll talk to him,” Carl said.

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Because,” Malinke said — and her eyes got wet — “I really only said it was okay for him to stay

here because of my ears, Carl. We *need* that money.”

The thing about Malinke’s ears’d come up that first night, when Carl’d come home from Long Street with Alfie. When they got inside, sure, it looked like things were going to go badly for a while — Malinke was in the lounge, watching cartoons with Temara — and Carl noticed, that the first thing she did when she saw Alfie, was reach out and hold their daughter. Carl’d picked up the remote and put the mute on the tv, and then straight away, he’d told about Alfie’s idea of staying with them and paying two thousand a month — and it was amazing, but as soon as he had, Malinke’d been lovely. Lovely to Alfie, even — and Carl knew it was for real, because she was smiling the whole time, and she kept crossing herself.

In between being lovely to Carl and lovely to Alfie, Malinke spent that whole first evening talking very softly to Temara — sort of getting her on board with the idea, and making sure she got the message that Alfie being there was a happy thing. She made Alfie stay for supper and after they’d eaten, Alfie left — saying he’d be back the next morning with his stuff. Malinke’d even walked him to the door.

She’d closed the door behind him, and leaned on it, and then laughed and cried — sort of at the same time, together. Then she’d run through to the bedroom, and Carl’d heard her get her bible out of the cabinet next to the bed.

When he went in to go check on her, she was lying on her stomach and reading out loud, in this voice that sounded like singing — that sounded like she was reading one, long hymn. She kicked her feet while she read. Carl just stood by the bed, and listened to her. She read to the end of the chapter, and then packed the bible away and closed their door, and told him about what they needed to do with the two thousand a month that Alfie was going to give them. She told him she’d already found out about it — and that it’d be about twelve thousand to fix her ears. But only three for the left one. She told him she’d been praying every night for a month for a way to afford it — and now, look, it’d finally come. The way she put it, it was like Alfie’d been left under that tree by angels, left there just waiting for Carl to pick him up.

That mood had only hung around the house for a few days, maybe a week, before Alfie started doing things to sour it — coming home late, stinking and singing to himself, and cooking food at three in the morning, and always forgetting about it and ruining all their pots and pans, one by one.

And worst of all, in the three weeks past, Carl’d only worked three days — carrying boxes of flat-packed wooden furniture into a new showroom in Salt River, then sitting on the floor with five other guys, and assembling it all. He looked for work every day, even around the northern suburbs — but he found nothing that was going to pay him enough. The money he’d got from Mrs. Kim was long gone, and he’d nearly gutted their bank account, and he’d begun to *really* worry about bills. He knew it was a month since he’d paid any — and for some of them, it might’ve been more like three or four. He’d been lying to Malinke about how much they had left for at least a week, and lying to her when she asked him about the bills she knew had to be paid.

He said, “I know about your ears, Linkie, but —”

“No but it’s *bad*, Carl,” Malinke said. “Worse than you know. When I whisper like this, I can’t hear myself anymore. It’s like I’m talking underwater. And,” she said — and the first tear came down her cheek — “I promise you, she *needs* me to talk to her. I know it. Like grass needs sun, she needs me to talk to her. She doesn’t know the world, Carl, without me she’d just be —”

“Lost,” Carl said. “Totally lost. I know, Linkie. It’d be the same for me.”



On the same day he promised Malinke he’d say something to Alfie, the first letter arrived. It was about their tv licence but it was sent by lawyers from Randburg. It came on a green piece of paper that was sealed on the edges — so it was like a letter and an envelope, at the same time.

Reading it was hard going for Carl because it was full of words like “expediently” and “notwithstanding” — but the amount he owed was printed in a box right in the middle of the page, and there was one paragraph written very plainly about them sending sheriffs to come and find him if he didn’t pay by the first of next month. He just folded the page and put it in his back pocket — then told Malinke he was going to Main Road to try find Alfie.

The day Carl found out about where Alfie worked, he’d seen him from the entrance of the Happy R5 Store. Alfie was sitting on a low stone wall, just a few metres down Essex Street. He was wearing sunglasses even though it was raining. From what Carl saw, he just sat on the wall until people walked by — then he’d put his hand up in front of his mouth and say something to them, and sometimes they’d stop, and sometimes they’d go into the house behind where Alfie sat. Carl went over to say hi — and when he got close, he noticed one of Alfie’s hands was sort of half-inside his jacket, holding an Energade bottle.

When Alfie saw Carl, he said “Shit, Carl. What you doing here, man?”

“Just buying some pencil crayons for Marie. They’re cheap here at the Chinese store. Is this where you work?”

Alfie had grey reflective lenses in his sunglasses, so Carl couldn’t see his eyes — but he got a really proud look on the rest of his face, and said, “You know it. Best job in the world. Check here, I’ve got my suip and everything,” he said — and he drank from the Energade bottle. It looked like water while it was in the bottle, but Carl could smell it was booze when Alfie sucked on it.

“That’s cool, man,” Carl said. Then he thought for a moment, and asked “Could I work with you here? What do you do?”

Alfie started smiling, then just put his hand on Carl’s shoulder. “No, china, I got it covered here,” he said. “I’m operating. I promise, Carl — I’m a wolf in sheep’s clothing, my bru. Just go home, don’t you worry about what I do,” he’d said — and then he’d slipped Carl a hundred rand note, right there on the street.

While he walked down Mountain Road, Carl tore the lawyer-letter into lots of pieces, and balled

them in a fist. On the corner of Dundonald, he bent down and put his fist into the gutter. As he let the paper fall, it crossed his mind that he might be fucking up — and he stood up quickly and checked around the street, feeling panicked — and then got on his hands and knees and looked down the drain, to make sure at least all the pieces were properly gone.

When he got to the end of Mountain, he couldn't cross Main Road right away because there was a lot of traffic going to Cape Town — and he hated walking between cars. He waited on the curb for the green man, with taxi-wallahs shouting at him, and fumes from the Golden Arrows catching in his throat. He wanted a cigarette so badly he thought he was going to faint, and the panic he'd been feeling turned into something angry — and right then, to Carl, the whole world seemed too ugly to be real, and like it was moving much too fast. His vision tunnelled, and began to mist around the edges. He passed by things without really seeing them, and the noise his pulse beat in his temples drowned out everything else. He saw Alfie from the corner of the road, at the very same time that Alfie took a sip from his bottle — and Carl felt something just give way, right in the pit of his stomach.

He walked fast up to Alfie — and then he saw his own hands go out, and grip Alfie's jacket, and lift him off the wall. He saw the bottle bounce on the pavement and the stuff inside it bubble, like spit. Alfie turned his face toward Carl, and Carl saw this tight, mean look on it — he looked like a hissing rat — and Carl felt a few weak punches land in the small of his back.

And then, he saw Alfie recognise who it was that had a hold of him — saw his eyes go wide again, and his hands go up, and heard him saying "Fuck Carl, easy, easy." Carl still had Alfie's jacket bunched in his hands, but the feeling'd returned to his arms — and they felt weird, tensed like they were. Alfie smiled and took a few deep breaths, and then started to cough, the worst cough Carl'd ever heard — a raw hack, that made his eyes goggle and stream. Soon, Carl was holding Alfie just to keep him up off the pavement.

When the coughing turned to wheezing, Carl helped Alfie onto the wall again. Between rattling breaths, Alfie pointed and said, "Quick — my suip."

Carl picked up the bottle and handed to him. Alfie sucked it like it was air, and he was drowning. When he was finished, his beard was beaded, and he had to wipe snot away from his nose.

Carl said, "Shit, sorry man. That wasn't me for a while there. But Alfie, that was a cough, hey? Are you alright?"

Alfie was quiet, but he put his hand up and nodded.

"Alfie, things are bad," Carl said.

"She found the stuff."

"What stuff? Who?"

"Never mind," Alfie said. "What's wrong?"

"They sent me a letter about my tv licence."

"Who?"

"Lawyers. From *Randburg*. And they said sheriffs were going to come if I didn't pay. And now I'm scared of more letters because I owe everyone something and I'm *fucked*, Alfie. I think I've got

five hundred bucks in the whole world.”

“Jesus. That’s rough. What’d you do with the letter?”

“I threw it away.”

“Nice.”

“Ja, but where’s our money, man? Please Alfie — I really need it, like *now*.”

Alfie said, “You and me as well, brother. I want to help you, Carl — obviously. But I’m waiting on my money, just like you are.”

“Can’t you speak to your boss or something?”

“I never speak to my boss.”

“Then how about your friend? Your partner.”

Alfie grimaced, and said “To be honest, Carl, things are very hectic for him at the moment.”

“Look,” Carl said. “I have to do *something* here, and I’m *asking* you to help me think.”

“Your folks still alive?”

“I don’t know, and I’m not asking them even if they are — so have another thought.”

“Shit, actually,” Alfie said — and then he shook his head, and said “No, never mind.”

“What?”

“No, it’s a bad idea.”

Carl said, “Come on, Alfie. Just say.”

“My friend might need a place,” Alfie said. “My partner, I mean. Samaar. I swear Carl, he’s the nicest guy in the world. And he’s *always* loaded.”

Carl didn’t say anything. He just turned around and walked home — and soon as he got inside, he went and spoke to Malinke about how much trouble they were in. He told her about things going pear-shaped on the Alfie front, and he told her about Alfie’s partner needing a place and he even told her he got the vibe the whole thing was getting dodgy — but he didn’t tell her about the letter.

Along the way, he’d mentioned Alfie telling him to try call his parents — and Malinke’d got onto that idea right away, as well. She’d said, “They’re your *parents*, Carl. Think of it like twenty years of birthday presents, coming all at once.”

“I’m not doing it, Linkie,” Carl said.

And she said, “Yes Carl, you are. Look how thin we’re all getting — especially you.”

He sat by the phone for twenty minutes before dialling, trying to think of any way not to have to do it. Eventually, he did a practice dial — and he found that his fingers remembered the number perfectly. He hung up as soon as it started to ring — and then wondered if it’d rung in that same house, if the phone was still on the table by the window in the lounge, if his dad had shouted “Not me” as soon as he’d heard it, and if his mom’d been about to get up.

There was a pack of cards on the table in front of Carl, and he played solitaire for a while to distract himself. He dealt it out four or five times but he couldn’t win — not even when he started flipping just one card off the deck at a time. Carl counted the cards and there were only forty-five. Three aces were missing.

When he called again, his dad answered after one ring, like he'd been waiting for it — saying "Yes, who's there?"

Carl said, "Dad? Jeez man, it's Carl. Your son."

There was a long silence, and then his dad just said "Speak to your mother" — and Carl heard him bang the receiver down, and then heard his footsteps going away, up the passage it sounded like.

Soon, he heard footsteps coming the other direction, and then a noise as the receiver was picked up, and then his mother saying "Carl?" — in a voice as dry and thin as tissue paper.

"Hi ma," Carl said. "Is your guys' phone still in the lounge?"

"Yes."

"So you can see out the window now?"

"Yes, I can Carl. Are you here?" she said — not in a hopeful way. More like she was worried.

"Oh, no ma, I'm not. I was just wondering if it was the same."

"Yes, it's the same."

"Is the guy across the road still there? The guy with the speedboat chained up in his driveway."

"No, he passed on. Indians live there now. Town is full of Indians now."

"Oh, okay. Listen ma, I think I need to speak to dad about something now. But hopefully when that's finished, we can chat some more?" Carl said.

He heard the receiver get passed on, and his parents having a couple of words that he couldn't make out.

In the end, his dad was horrible about it. He got back on the phone saying "What do you want?" — and then he just wouldn't let Carl explain anything properly. As soon as he thought he knew what Carl was saying, he'd just cut in with questions like "You're *unemployed* still?" and "What's the matter with your kid, anyway?" — and Carl was patient for a while, but finally he just started speaking loudly, and quickly, and he told about the Alfie situation, and how this wasn't like a scummy thing he was doing — he was actually fucked, and he didn't have a clue how else to save his family except ask for some money now, just to help pay some bills.

His dad went quiet for a while. When he spoke again, all he said was, "Right now, there's a bergie called Alfie living with you, in your *house*?"

And Carl couldn't say anything back to him. After a while, he just heard his dad breathe, deeply — and then let it out with a sigh, and hang up the phone.

Carl sat there with the receiver beeping in his hand until the line went dead again — feeling so angry and sad, that his mouth was sour, and he worried he was going to throw up. He sat until the nausea passed — and then he went through to the bedroom, and lay down, and slept until the late afternoon.



Samaar didn't want to share a room with Alfie, so they put him on the sleeper couch in the lounge. They found some boxes in the storeroom outside, and he arranged them along the wall and unpacked his clothes into them, like they were drawers.

At least Alfie hadn't lied about Samaar — he really was one of the nicest people Carl'd ever met. He had a friendly face, but Carl could tell, it always kept a bit of fear in it — and sometimes, he'd do this thing where while you were speaking to him, he'd go off somewhere else in his mind. You'd see it happen in his face, and then he'd come back again and look guilty, and smile at you — and touch you lightly on the shoulder or hold your hand, and ask you to repeat yourself. He had sharp features and wide, warm brown eyes. He was beautiful in the same way cats are — and he did little things, too, like sort out the garbage bags, and buy washing powder and Sunlight for the house, and soap for everyone — and having him around, even Malinke said so, was almost better than if didn't have to be there at all.

Every day, Samaar wore these things he called boubous — with a small, matching hat. Carl saw him dressing once, by accident, and for underpants he just wore a piece of cloth that he wound and tied round his waist. He stayed at home all the time, mainly in the lounge except for when he had to pray — and then he'd just go into Alfie's room for half an hour or so. He asked everybody to keep the curtains in the lounge closed — and whenever there was any sound at the door, he'd get up to check it. Mostly, he was happy just to sit on the couch all day and watch whatever Temara wanted to on tv.

And in the beginning, that was the weirdest thing about having Samaar stay — the way Temara was around him. She *loved* him — that's how it looked. Every picture she drew for the first week after he moved in had him in it — sometimes, he was on a throne, sometimes, he was on the back of a camel, or an elephant. Samaar had a woolly beard, that sort of stuck out from his jaw — and it happened a few times, when Carl walked into the lounge and he'd see his daughter not even watching her cartoons, just sitting next to Samaar with both her hands bunched in his beard, and staring up into his face.

The first night he'd moved in, he'd cooked them something that had tomatoes and peanuts in it — and he'd given Carl an envelope thick with four thousand rand in cash. Malinke'd cried when she'd seen it, and Carl nearly had, as well. "October's rent. For me and for this one," Samaar'd said, looking at Alfie. After supper, while everyone else was distracted because Samaar was showing them some things he kept in a wooden box — precious stones, polished teeth, pieces of silver — Carl took the envelope through to the bedroom. He sat on the bed and counted the money, and then locked the door and got the letters he'd been hiding in his cupboard.

Six more had come. A phone bill, and a notice from the municipality about their lights, and another one about their water, and three lawyer-letters — about money they owed to Game for a stove they bought a year ago on lay-by, and money they owed to Mr. Price, and the two months' rent they owed to Home Bodies. For the first time, Carl made himself look properly at the numbers in the letters. He tried to do the sums in his head, but the figures he was coming up with seemed crazy — so he left the room, and went and got a calculator.

While he was punching the numbers in — watching the total grow and grow — he felt all the

happiness inside him taint. He realised that even with four thousand there in the envelope, he wasn't close to being able to square it all, and he began to feel like paying anyone anything would be like a cartoon — where you plug a hole in a sinking boat with your finger or something, but the water just shoots out of somewhere else, and then you plug that leak that as well, but it keeps happening, and the boat fills up. In the end, even though the letter about the Game account also warned him about sheriffs, he decided to settle the electricity and pay a bit to Home Bodies.

When he got home the next day from doing it, there was another letter waiting for him on the mat inside the front door. Like the tv licence one, it was green, and sealed like its own envelope.

Carl didn't even open it before putting it away in the cupboard.



After two more weeks, the house phone'd been disconnected, and Carl had a job with long hours — and strange things started happening at the house. Samaar's cellphone'd started ringing all the time, and before he'd answer it, he'd always go through to Alfie's room and lock the door, and Alfie — his routine'd also changed. He was hanging around the house till Samaar sent him somewhere, and then coming back, and then going out again — all day like that.

Carl wasn't around to notice it, but he heard from Malinke that as soon as the sun went down, people were knocking on their door now — and every time it happened, Samaar would shout for Alfie to go and answer it. Malinke said Alfie would bend down and look through the letterbox to check who it was — then open the door just a bit, and say a few things she could never hear, and stick his arm out — and then that'd be it, the people'd go away.

One night, Carl came home from his shift at Don Pedro's, and found two kids standing on his stoep. One had a pipe in his mouth and his jacket spread out against the wind like a cape, and the other had a box of matches in his hands. They didn't notice Carl standing there — or else, they just didn't care.

Carl'd been washing dishes for seven hours, then he'd had to stack the chairs and the tables — plus his boss'd been horrible to him all night because he'd asked for the next day off, and then broken a plate. It'd got Carl in a bad mood, and he said to the kids, "Hey, you two, fuck off."

The one with the matches said, "But Goblin said we could just blaze here. We can't go home to smoke."

"Who's Goblin?" Carl asked. Then it was obvious. "This is bullshit," he said — and then he shouted, "Just fuck off, okay? Fuck off!"

His shouting made some dogs bark, and the kids went away quickly. Carl opened the security gate and then — as he put his key into the lock on the door — he heard his neighbour come out of his place. The key stuck a little, and he couldn't get inside before he heard the guy call out, "Hi, sorry, excuse me."

“Oh hi, sorry for shouting,” Carl said. “Everything’s fine now.”

“Oh, no worries about that,” the guy said. He was about Carl’s age, and he looked tired. More than that. He looked tired and anxious — like he’d been staying up just to speak to Carl.

“Am I in trouble?” Carl said.

“Um, maybe,” the guy said. “Do you want to come inside?”

“No, just say. Please.”

“Your estate agents were here this afternoon. They knocked on your door for like half an hour but nobody answered. Then they knocked on my door.”

“What happened?”

“They asked me where you were, and I said you were probably at work.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” Carl said. “I’ve almost got enough to pay them now. That’s fine, thanks.”

The guy made a pinched face, and then rubbed his eyes with his fingers. He sort of started to speak, twice — but he backed out of it both times.

“Oh, flip,” Carl said. “What is it?”

“They know you’ve got people in there,” the guy said.



Early in the morning on the 17th of October, Temara’s birthday, Carl woke in a sweat, with all his teeth feeling ground down to the nerve — and couldn’t get back to sleep because the windows were rattling so much. He was exhausted and he knew he’d been having nightmares, and he wasn’t holding on to his thoughts very well.

Eventually, like water taken off the boil, his mind settled. He felt the weight of it in his neck and his shoulders. *They know you’ve got people in there.*

He turned away from the windows and tickled Temara’s back. The rattling didn’t die down at all — and lying there, it made Carl remember a holiday he’d had with his parents when he was ten. It was the last December they’d gone to the coast, and the only house they’d been able to afford to rent was by the train tracks — and every morning at four, a coal train’d gone past on its way to Cape Town. The train upset Carl so much, he’d cried about it every morning for a week — until his dad’d just packed everything up, and they’d driven home, four days before they were meant to. He remembered lying in that room, in that iron bed — how things would tremble for a while, then begin to shake, and then the light would be on the window and then you’d hear it, and how it’d keep coming until you were sure it was the last thing you’d ever hear and the headlamp in your eyes was the last thing you’d ever see.

But this, Carl thought, this was nearly as bad — the way the glass was rattling in the panes, and that whistle that came through the joints, and the furious sound the ivy made when it lifted in a gust — and underneath all of that, Temara breathing funny because she was sleeping on her stomach, and

Malinke muttering to herself, probably because she was having bad dreams. It took all his strength to get out of bed and go over to the window. He pulled back the curtain and tasted dust in his mouth — and through the flapping ivy, he saw a red sky and fine black clouds running through it, and the tops of some bluegums from the abandoned lot, shaking so much, the leaves looked like silver fire. “No man,” Carl said. “This wind isn’t right.”

He went through to the bathroom and tried to get some water at the basin. Nothing — hot or cold, no matter how far he turned the taps. He tried the bath and the cold was dry, but the hot let out whatever was left in the pipes. He drank it, and it was silty. He went through to the kitchen, softly so he didn’t wake Samaar — and he tried the taps in there. When nothing came out of them, either, he knew.

He went back into the bedroom and sat down on Malinke’s side, and played with the curls in her hair for a while. While he watched her sleeping, Carl thought of every single person he knew in the world, that he’d ever known — and one by one, he realised there was no ways they’d be able to help him.

Outside, the wind blew a tile off a roof, and it smashed onto the street. Temara jerked awake — but Malinke stayed sleeping.

“It’s my birthday,” Temara said.

Carl rolled over Malinke and hugged his daughter, and said “Yes, my Marie-biscuit, it is.”

She giggled, and then she started pulling Malinke’s hair to wake her up. It always worked — Carl saw his wife’s eyes open, very blue that morning, and tense.

The first thing Malinke said was “Happy birthday, my angel.”

“What’re we going to do?” Temara asked.

“Ask daddy,” Malinke said, and then smiled and yawned. “The wind’s bad today, hey. I hear it now.”

“It’s horrible,” Carl said.

Temara said, “Daddy, what’re we going to do?”

“Well guys,” Carl said. “I hate to bring it up, but there’s no water today — the taps are dry.”

Malinke asked how come.

“They must be laying pipes or something,” Carl said — but he looked at Malinke, and he could tell from her face that she was guessing why already. Really why.

“But don’t worry, I’ve got it under control,” he said. Then he held Temara’s hand, and told her, “We’re going to have a lot of fun today, my girl. I just need to wait until eight for Shoprite to open — then I’ll go get you a little present, and we can start the day properly.”

“What about the water?” Malinke said.

Carl looked at her, knowing she’d see everything in his face — and he said, “You don’t need water to have a fun birthday. Hey, Linkie? Please?”

At about seven o’clock, Temara went back to sleep, and Carl told Malinke that he needed to think for a while, and that he was going for a walk. When he got outside, the sun was rising over the harbour

— in a mist that made the cranes look like dinosaurs, those those ones with the long necks — and Carl could tell it was a hot sun, that was just going to stoke the sky, and get the wind blowing harder. He snaked through the streets, one block across, then one down — because having the wind tunnel at you for too long was just hellish.

Trash blew through the streets, mainly newspapers and shopping bags. Seagulls dived for grease paper and cartons that'd had fast food in them once — and cats with drippy eyes lay on the shiny parts of rusted steel roofs. As he turned onto Gympie Street, Carl saw a red dress freed from a washing-line someone'd strung up using a lamp-post — flying up and into the street like a ghost had got inside it, and then spinning as it fell, slowly to the ground. He went over to it, and as he bent down, a woman — she was topless, but she was covering her breasts with an arm — ran out of a house across the road and picked up the dress, then ran back inside again.

After walking for an hour, Carl was tired and sticky with sweat that'd dried in the wind — and he hadn't had any of the thoughts he'd hoped for. He got back to Main Road and Shoprite was opening up, so he went inside. He spent about twenty minutes in the aisle where the toys were, looking at all of them. He knew that whatever he bought had to make Temara happy — but he also knew that somehow, he needed to be able to use it to save the day for Malinke, as well. Eventually, he thought he might've actually found the perfect thing.

When she first saw it, Carl could tell Temara wasn't sure about the ball — but he pitched the idea of soccer in the park to her in a really excited way, and he made her look at how blue the ball was, and reminded her that was her favourite colour. She came around to the idea after that — and Carl saw that Malinke was smiling again, watching Temara be happy.

“And,” Carl said, “What's even better, we're going to *shower* there after we play! Just like real soccer players.”

Temara squealed and jumped off the bed — she was totally in the spirit of things — but Malinke went very quiet. Carl announced that he'd take care of breakfast. He went through to the kitchen and made oats, using a five-litre bottle of water he bought at Shoprite. They ate in the bedroom and got their things together — then left soon after.

The wind hadn't calmed at all by the time they got to the park on Victoria Walk. Carl carried a laundry bag that had the ball, three towels, some shower gel, and a change of clothes for all of them in it. He set the bag down on a bench, and it listed in the wind.

Malinke was still being quiet. She sat down next to the bag and stared off, towards the docks. Her hair blew around, all over her face — but she didn't clear it away, even once.

“Okay, Marie,” Carl said. “What's the first thing we do?”

“Play.”

“No, before that, we stretch. We're real soccer players, we don't want to hurt ourselves.”

Carl did a few stretches, and Temara tried to copy them. She kept doing them wrong, really wrong — and after a while he was sure she was going to pop something out of joint if they kept going, so he just said “Okay, time to play.”

He went to get the ball out of the bag. While he was there, he kissed Malinke on her cheek — and she didn't even seem to feel it.

"Oh wait, we need goals," Carl said. He looked around and saw some building junk on the other side of the fence, and fetched two broken bricks out of the pile. "There," he said. "I'm the goalie, you're the star. Just kick it at me. Let's see you score."

The ball Carl'd bought was one of those cheap plastic ones — that you can't inflate, that come in bright colours, with black pentagons stamped on them just so they *look* like real soccer balls. It behaved ridiculously in the wind. The first kick Temara tried flew nearly straight up, then behind her — then scuttled across the ground, and ended up against the fence on the other side of the park. She ran off and fetched it, laughing — but Carl knew from then that he was in for a nightmare.

They swapped sides, so Temara was kicking with the wind. Every time the ball got into the air, it flew off at crazy angles, miles from where Carl was waiting for it, and he kept having to run and fetch. Sometimes, the ball would move before Temara got to kick it, and she'd swing her leg through nothing — and fall over. Carl got worried every time that happened, but Temara always just laughed, like it all was part of the game.

They stopped for a water break, and went to sit with Malinke on the bench.

"Did you see, mommy?" Temara said.

"Yes, my angel. I saw everything."

"Hey Linkie," Carl said. "Why don't you go try the showers? It'll make you feel better, maybe."

The look on Malinke's face, as she picked up the laundry bag and went off — it even made Temara worry. That scared, babyish look came across his daughter's face — and Carl knew he needed to do something, quickly, otherwise she was going to cry.

He said, "Okay, Marie. Halftime's finished. Are you ready for some *super* soccer now?"

She smiled again, and said "Am I still the star?"

"Of course, except this time, I'm a crazy goalie," Carl said — and he made a face that he knew she'd laugh at, and then jumped up and started dancing around the ball, close to it — saying "Come on, Marie, kick it past me."

Carl put every bit of effort he could into the game. He found the closer to the ball he was, the more chance it had at least of hitting him, which was much more fun — so he changed the game by chasing Temara, and making her kick at him almost like in self-defence. Once, without even planning to do it, he dived for a ball she'd connected quite well, and caught it — and that'd made her scream and laugh like she was four years old again. The ground was hard, and littered with stones, and broken glass, and clumps of paper thorns — but Carl kept diving, every time he could, *needing* the reaction it got.

The next time Carl looked over at the bench, he saw Malinke sitting there again. The sight of her stopped the game, dead. She looked so cold. Her lips were blue, and she sat there hugging herself, with her wet hair getting blown around in clumps like she had dreadlocks. Her face was red and she might've been crying — but it was also just the way she was staring — off, into that middle-distance

nothing, that place everyone stares, when trouble comes.

Carl picked up the ball and said, “That’s enough now, Marie — I’m sweating like a pig. Let’s go shower.”

He went alone to the bench and fetched the laundry bag. Up close, he saw Malinke had goosebumps all over. “Is it just cold water?” he asked her — but she didn’t answer, she just stared off. He walked back to Temara and together, they went off towards the showers.

The showers were in the corner of the park — in a building that looked like a substation, with a green roof, and cream sides. The walls were covered in graffiti, but some guy’d taken bright red paint, and sprayed WHERE WHIL I SPEND MY HAPPY DAYS? over most of the rest of it. There were rusted bars in the windows, and there was rusted chickenwire over the bars — and all the window glass was missing. Carl led his daughter into the building — smelt it, saw the pools of water and the shiny film they had on them, saw the moss growing on the walls, heard pigeons or rats scurrying in the roof — and said “Oh jeez, forget this,” and walked right back out again with her.

Temara laughed and said, “Wow it stinks! Why did mommy shower there?”

“Ja, I don’t know,” Carl said. “Just don’t say anything, okay? Please, Marie. My soccer star.”

No one said anything on the walk home. Malinke walked between Carl and Temara, holding hands with both of them. She only let go when they got inside the house.

Samaar and Alfie were in the lounge, watching tv. As soon as Carl and his family walked in, Samaar leaned forward and put the tv off. Then he said, “I heard about a little princess’s birthday today” — and he took a small, wrapped thing out of his pocket, and gave it to Temara. She opened it, and in her hand, was a big piece of tiger’s eye, on a leather thong.

She smiled and hugged Samaar, then held the stone up and said, “Look, it’s the same like your eyes.”

Samaar smiled, and said “Yes. But it is also from your friend Alfie. Why don’t you give him a hug, also?” He waited for just a second, then — long before it got cruel — he laughed and hugged her again. She screamed she was so happy.

Carl thought it was a nice moment, probably the best one of the day for Temara so far — but it made Malinke walk straight out of the room.

Carl turned on the tv, and put his hand on Temara’s shoulder, and said “Marie, are you going to watch with uncle Samaar for a while?” Then he went through to the bedroom, and closed the door behind him.

Malinke was sitting on the edge of the bed. She’d already got her bible out the cabinet. Carl stood in front of her for a while, saying her name over and over, louder each time. She kept her eyes down. He watched what she was doing. She was turning to the pages that years ago, soon after they were married and at a time when Carl had a nice job in a library, she’d marked with a black koki along the edges — just so she’d never read a word of them by mistake ever again. Carl hadn’t really understood it, but it’d been a big thing for her — she’d asked him to sit with her while she did it, and she’d read him a verse or a chapter or something, and she’d cried like anything, the whole way through.

She found the pages and had them open in her lap — and then she reached into her shirt and took her crucifix out, and held it there in her hands like she was praying. While she read, Carl looked at the necklace. He saw how thin and shiny the leather was, and how in at least two places, it'd broken, and she'd fixed it by tying knots. When he saw a tear hit the page beneath her face, he said "Linkie" again — three more times, and then he reached forward and grabbed her wrists.

Her whole body tensed, and she said, "No Carl! Leave me alone!"

He was about to say something, when they heard a knock on the front door — three short bangs, hard enough to rattle the letterbox. If you were anywhere in the house, you would've heard it.

"Oh flip," Carl said. "It's the sheriffs."

He ran out the room and into the lounge — and told Alfie and Samaar to go hide in Alfie's room, and to lock themselves in there.

The knock came again, and he heard something like a toolbox get opened out on the stoep. He took Temara to the door with him, and opened it.

Outside, stood a woman he recognised. Mandy, or Mindy, or something — the estate agent. Next to her, kneeling down, was a guy in overalls, getting a hacksaw out of a toolbox. There was a thing like a blowtorch on the stoep, as well.

Carl looked at her. She had a thick stack of papers in one of her hands. "Hello," he said. "This is my daughter, Temara. It's her birthday today. If you just give us half an hour, we'll get our things packed up and we'll leave. You don't take the gate off or anything. Please," he said, and smiled at the woman.

She looked at him, and then at Temara — for a long time at Temara. "Okay," she said. "Half an hour."

Carl closed the door, and took Temara's hand, and went and knocked on the door to Alfie's room. When it opened, he said, "Listen guys, I'm sorry, but we've all got to get out of here in half an hour."

Alfie looked like he was about to say something — but Samaar put a hand on his shoulder to stop him, and said, "Yes Carl, that's fine."

"Okay, thanks. Wish me luck," Carl said — and he led Temara back through the lounge to the bedroom. He hadn't said a thing to her since opening the door, and it amazed him that she hadn't asked any questions yet.

They heard Malinke from down the passage, crying loudly, and reading at the same time. Her breath was short and it kept getting caught up by sobs — and her voice, reading like that — sounded so horrible it made Temara cry. She ran ahead of Carl, and when she got to the room, Malinke stopped reading — and just held out her arms so Temara could go lie down in them.

And right then, from nowhere, Carl was gripped by calm, clear purpose — and the most wonderful feeling went through him, this knowledge that he had strength, and that Malinke needed some from him — and he said, "Come now, Linkie. It's okay, it doesn't matter. Let me talk to you."

She wept again, and said "What do you mean, Carl? It's done, now. It's over." Tears were running down her face like out of taps, and her breathing sounded painful. She fought to get on top of

her breath, and then she said, “Listen, listen here Carl. This is us,” she said — and she read a long, terrible thing, that ended with her going “I was not in safety, neither had I rest, neither was I quiet — yet trouble came. Do you see, Carl? That’s *us*. He’s *done this* to us — and we *can’t* fight, it’s just over.”

“Linkie,” Carl said. “Listen, please just listen to me. We need to leave in half an hour, okay? We need to get all our clothes and food and whatever, and just put it in the car and go. We’ve got some money for petrol still, I’ll drive us far away — where we don’t know anyone and they don’t know us — and when we get there, Linkie, I’ll *work*, man. Shit. You hear about these guys working sixteen hours a day, I’ve never done that, but of course I can. I will. I want to. I don’t care about this house, Linkie. I don’t care about the stove, I don’t care about the water, I don’t care about anything except you. You’re the only thing the world’s ever given me I actually want — it’s only ever ever been you, and Marie — and you can blame God all you like, but I messed things up for us a couple of times, at least, and I know that and it won’t happen again. I really... I don’t know why the world is so hard for me, Linkie. I don’t why I’m always so tired and I don’t know why I always feel like I’m not right, and why people always tease me — I don’t. But I’ll *work*, Linkie — two jobs, three jobs, whatever. Whatever it takes, so we can pay our bills and fix your ears — and eat properly, and keep Marie happy, and flipping just keep going. That’s all I want — just to keep going with you — and we can do it but please, please just help us get out of here now.”

When he was finished talking, Malinke leaned forward, and wiped tears off his cheeks with her hands. She held his face and looked into his eyes — and she said “Carl, even if you’re lying, and even if you just end up being wrong, it’s okay — but please, just promise me now that if we go, we’ll make it. I’ll believe you, if you promise me now.”

“I promise,” Carl said — and as soon as he did, Malinke stood up.

She picked Temara up off the bed, and said “Okay Marie, let’s go. You have to help mommy pack in the kitchen. Daddy’ll do our clothes.”

Malinke took Temara through to the kitchen, and Carl opened the cupboards and got all their clothes out, and piled them on the bed. He found some laundry bags and a duffel bag, and an elephant-skin suitcase his parents’d given him when he left home for the army. He stuffed all the clothes into the laundry bags and the duffel bag, and decided the suitcase was staying behind.

He took the clothes through to the lounge and then went into the kitchen. On the counter, there were about twenty plastic bags filled with stuff from the cupboards. Malinke was on her knees, reaching things out of the cupboards, and passing them to Temara to put in the bags.

“Hey, nice guys,” Carl said. “What can I do?”

“Bathroom,” Malinke said.

Carl took two packets from the kitchen and went and packed everything he could find in the bathroom, even the shards of soap in the soap-dishes. He took those packets through to the lounge, as well.

Samaar was in there, packing his bags — and soon after, Malinke and Temara came through,

carrying the packets from the kitchen.

“Okay, what now?” Carl said.

Malinke said, “I’m going to take one of these boxes, and pack the special things. Help Marie with her drawing stuff.”

Carl helped Temara pack her crayons and her paper, and then he found a big envelope so they could pack all her drawings nicely. He helped her fit her new ball into one of the packets from the kitchen, and when that was done, he spent a while thinking about anything he wanted to pack for himself. He found his CV and he put it in the envelope with Temara’s drawings. Then he checked the packets from the kitchen to make sure his flask was in one of them.

Soon after, Alfie came out of his room, with his sports bag over his shoulder. “Hey,” he said, “I found these” — showing Carl some more of Temara’s pictures.

While Alfie was helping Carl slip the pictures into the envelope, Malinke walked through the lounge, with the box in her arms, and went into the other room. Carl heard some drawers squeak, and some things get put into the box. When she came out, she said “Okay, I’m ready.”

Carl went and opened the door, and unlocked the gate. No one was outside anymore, and he told himself to remember to mention that to Malinke, when they got in the car — just to remind her that wherever they went, and whatever happened to them, there’d always be people in the world who’d be kind if they could be — even if it was just in little ways.

He went and unlocked the car and opened the boot. Malinke and Temara came out the house, carrying packets. Behind them, Samaar came out, carrying the duffel bag Carl’d packed.

The four of them went back and forth, and loaded the car up in five minutes. Alfie didn’t help carry anything. He just stood outside and smoked a cigarette, and drank out of his Energade bottle.

When the car was full, and after he’d gone back inside to do a last check-around, Carl unclipped the housekeys from his bunch, and got the spares from Alfie and Samaar, and left them all on the doormat inside.

He went back to the car, and said “Okay Samaar. I guess we’re off. Wish us luck.”

“Yes, good luck, my friend,” Samaar said.

“And I’m sorry, hey. You paid us and everything.”

“No, Carl. I am sorry, for you,” Samaar said. He looked at Malinke and said “Good mother, guard the angel for me” — and then he went down on his knees, so he was like the same height as Temara, and hugged her for a long time.

Carl said, “Hey, cheers Alfie. Good luck and everything, hey.”

Alfie didn’t say anything. He just stared, with a look in his eyes that told Carl this was just the kind of thing that happened to him — that’d *been* happening to him — probably ever since the army, and maybe even before then, as well. Carl walked over to him, and put his hand on his shoulder, and said “Alfie, just so you know — if it was just me going, I would have asked you if you wanted to come with.”

Alfie said, “Really?”

And Carl said, “Really” — and then walked back to the car, and opened his door and got inside.

Malinke and Temara climbed in, and they all waved — watching Alfie and Samaar go off down the road together. Carl put the key in the ignition, and it took three goes to turn over. When it had, he just sat, and let it idle for a while.

He looked at Temara in the backseat, who was still waving to Samaar and Alfie.

He looked over at Malinke, who had the box she’d packed on her lap. The box wasn’t sealed, and right at the top of it, sticking out, was the cassette player he’d bought her thirteen years ago. He knew the tapes would be in there, as well — even the stretched ones.

He looked out his window at the house, standing open — and as he felt a gust of wind hit the car, he watched the front door slam shut.

He closed his eyes and felt his nerve quiver, and leaned his head on the steering wheel.

Malinke said, “Carl, promise me again we’re going to make it.”

“I promise,” he said, and sat up. Then he put the car in gear and then they were moving, heading north, towards the highway — with the wind and the tar under their tyres together making a sound like a shell does, when you hold it against your ear.

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